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THE PLAYFUL AUDIENCE: PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING, MEDIA FANDOM, &
THE OMNIPRESENCE OF MEDIA SMARKS

by

SHANE TOEPFER

Under the Direction of Ted Friedman

ABSTRACT

This dissertation posits a new model for understanding media audiences, bringing the scholarship of game studies to the critical analysis of audience practices. The concept of play proves beneficial for understanding the complex processes of media audiences, as they are able to traverse dichotomous categories when engaging media content. The genre of professional wrestling proves a perfect case study for examining these playful audience practices, and this study is an ethnographic account of the practices of wrestling fans. Focusing on the behaviors of fans at live wrestling events, in online contexts, and in the subcultural setting of a card game entitled *Champions of the Galaxy*, this study demonstrates the necessity of the concept of play for understanding what media audiences do when they engage media content. These practices, however, are always negotiated by the hegemonic power of the rules that structure how audiences are encouraged to engage content, resulting in ideological constraints on the possibilities play offers.

INDEX WORDS: Play, Audience, Smark, Professional wrestling, Media fandom, Fan community, Playful audience, Game

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OMNIPRESENCE OF MEDIA SMARKS

by

SHANE TOEPFER

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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OMNIPRESENCE OF MEDIA SMARKS

by

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The Playful Audience – Professional Wrestling, Media Fandom, & the Omnipresence of Media Smarks

Overview

Critical scholarship in communication studies has become increasingly focused on the complex reading practices of media audiences. This dissertation project contributes to theoretical models of media audiences by focusing on two parallel scholarly discourses pertaining to media consumption: audience studies and game studies. This coming together of distinct bodies of critical scholarship yields new insights concerning notions of media fandom, revealing a convergent conception of a *playful* media audience. The concept of play brings together these two fields, providing new insights on the practices of media audiences. This notion of “play” reveals media practices that structure how audiences are limited by ideological constructs of consumption, while simultaneously offering the liberatory or utopian possibilities of resistance that mirror the practices of “children” playing with toys or usurping the rules of more structured game spaces. It is within the playful realm of professional wrestling where these processes can be identified and extrapolated to the contemporary media landscape.

Introduction

The field of audience studies finds itself in a quandary of creating binaries, either/or dichotomies that posit media audiences in static categories. As we shall see, these binaries transcend various theoretical models of media audiences, from cultural studies to psychoanalysis to the social sciences. In the end, these perspectives cast media audiences into dichotomous

categories, differing on how much agency or power to grant them. Media audiences are reduced to being active or passive, creative or vulnerable, spectators or consumers (Hall, 1993; Tulloch, 2000; Fiske, 1989). These hermeneutic categories have resulted in unsalvageable debates within critical scholarship. However, these debates are the result of misguided approaches, as instead of positing media audiences as either/or categories, scholars should instead think of the relationship between media texts and audiences as a both/and process. More specifically, the notion of play provides a better way of thinking about media audiences and their relationship to media texts. Play serves as a way outside of these binary categories, allowing for media audiences to be both active and passive, both creative and vulnerable, both spectators and consumers. By looking at the media genre of professional wrestling, the playful processes of media audiences becomes evident and provides a framework for understanding the relationship media audiences have with media texts.

Implicit in this argument of conceptualizing media audiences as playful is confronting the denigration of play within cultural and critical contexts. After all, play is often considered the domain of children and described as frivolity, a tenet challenged by many theorists within game studies (Gee, 2003). Gerard Jones (2002) quotes child psychologist Lenore Terr in *Killing Monsters*, who states that, “Our culture is very hard on play...There always has to be a point, developmentally, where the play principle has to make way for the reality principle”(p.72). How quick we are to dismiss play as less important than more productive and realistic uses of time. And this abandonment of play as a part of childhood development illustrates the reliance on binary categories in contemporary culture. We have become ideologically conditioned to assume that play-time is over and it is time to be an adult. This push towards binary categories has ideological consequences, including a misunderstanding of how media audiences engage

texts. It is for this reason that we must examine media audiences as playful; to more fully understand how media audiences engage media texts. The genre of professional wrestling serves as an exemplary case study due to its denigration within contemporary culture, mirroring the dismissal of play itself.

In the context of a staged professional wrestling match there is a tremendous amount at stake. This phrase may seem absurd, especially within the context of a dissertation project that focuses on media audiences. After all, while showing a clip of professional wrestling on *Whacked Out Videos* (20008), host Olivia Munn described wrestling as “community-theater for high school dropouts.” Despite this cultural denigration, the stakes involved in the realm of professional wrestling carry over into other media experiences and situations in fascinating ways. In fact, this denigration is consistent with the Deconstructionist critique of binary opposites where one aspect of the binary is always privileged over the other. Focusing back on professional wrestling, the participants involved in staged matches obviously have their lives at stake, trusting their “opponents” with their own wellbeing. As we know, professional wrestling is a staged, “fake” encounter where participants work together to craft narratives of arguable and variable complexity. There is also much at stake for wrestling companies in these simulated contests, as their economic livelihood depends on the ability of the wrestling narratives to captivate audiences who are willing to pay for the content. Equally, there is much at stake for wrestling fans who identify with certain characters, and for that matter wrestling companies, who position vital parts of their overall identities alongside experiences within this denigrated genre. Indeed, the wrestling genre is a fascinating, complex arena where aspects of production, consumption, and identification all intersect and intermingle. And this is why this project looks at professional wrestling as an example of the practices of media audiences, a model of how

media audiences “play” with media texts. It is this notion of play that reveals limitations of previous conceptions of media audiences, highlighted by a genre that seems to encourage play at its core like professional wrestling does.

Studies aimed at examining media audiences are not a new phenomenon in communication scholarship. Theoretical models of the media audience have positioned this audience as vulnerable entities that are passively exposed to media texts (Wertham, 1955; Merton, 1946; McChesney, 2004), as well as active participants able to resist the hegemonic processes of media texts (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1992; Ang, 1991). These models differ in terms of how they conceptualize the media audience, positioning this entity on opposite sides of a theoretical continuum. Later theoretical models of the elusive media audience have focused on the creative capabilities of media audiences (Jenkins, 1992), focusing on how fans can participate in the peripheries of the media landscape, creating their own works on the fringes of mediated universes. This model matured in 2006 with Henry Jenkins’ notion of “convergence,” as Jenkins positioned media audiences as moving from the periphery to the production process itself, obfuscating the distinctions between media producers and consumers. This project explores these various models of media audiences through the lens of professional wrestling, illuminating the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches while introducing a parallel body of critical scholarship that seems to more accurately identify the complex processes that exist within each of these paradigms, as well as outside of them. Specifically, the realm of game studies and its focus on “play” seems to offer some dialectical synthesis of these various theoretical constructions, allowing for notions of fun and game to be introduced into the sphere of audience studies in a way that highlights the strengths and weaknesses of previous theoretical iterations.

Game studies as an academic discipline offers a theoretical language that provides crucial insight into audience reading and writing practices, although the field seems to struggle with conceptualizing the roles of audiences in relation to notions of interactivity and the textual properties of games themselves (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Galloway, 2006). The field of game studies, according to Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) iconic *Rules of Play*, is an attempt to "establish a critical discourse for game design...terms that form the foundation of our critical vocabulary. As we explore the largely uncharted terrain of game design, definitions stake out boundaries, the way a set of points define a plane in space"(pp. 2-3). As we shall see, much of the work in this project will be an attempt to use the critical vocabulary established in the field of game studies and explore its applicability outside of these aforementioned "boundaries." Terms such as "play," "game," and "interactivity" serve as the foundation of this discipline, as game studies builds on the fields of cultural studies (Wark, 2007) and literary studies (Bogost, 2006) familiar to communication scholars. In addition, game studies maintains roots in game theory, or what Salen and Zimmerman (2004) describe as "the mathematical study of decision making"(p. 232). Based off the work of mathematicians Oscar Morganstern and John Von Neumann, game theory involves the examination of games as systems of strategic decisions, or "decision trees" (1942). Game studies also pulls from the psychological literature of animal and children play processes (Bateson, 1955; Pelligrini, 2005; Hall, 1904). Focusing on evolution and development, psychologists have devoted significant attention to play practices that influenced much of the early work in game studies. The multidisciplinary approach of game studies sets the field up very well as a framework for engaging all media audiences and practices. These multiple influences (cultural studies, literary criticism, game theory, and psychology) all come together to create the amalgamation of the game studies discipline. As we shall see, game

studies as a discursive space yields opportunities for understanding how media audiences consume content in a variety of contexts and iterations.

As the field of game studies has matured there has been a distinct departure from the focus on play itself, instead exploring new media iterations of seemingly infinite game spaces. This focus on video games and new media technologies (Taylor, 2006; Manovich, 2002) has shifted the focus of the field towards a specific medium of digital technology rather than maintaining the more inclusive aspects of the field's origins. Explorations of the role of play have particularly been contextually limited to digital environments and algorithmic contexts. This project asserts a returned emphasis on the features of play, focusing on how these supposed infinite games spaces are in fact structured experiences that offer potential for liberatory experiences, but only in the imaginary spaces of play constructed by the player. Rather than manifest themselves in the structured arenas of digital game spaces, the liberatory potential of play is entirely subjective and imaginary, residing in the minds of media audiences. Audience studies have long posited readers of media, and the potential of writing media (Jenkins, 1992). But these processes produce limited categories of media consumers – fans and anti-fans, hegemonic and resistant readers. The concept of play or playful media consumption explodes these boundaries, producing a framework for understanding how media audiences playfully experiment with multiple media personalities and identifications. The focus on play and fun illustrates that we, as media audiences in an increasingly mediated environment, are in a constant state of play, always assimilating media experiences and playing with this raw material, constructing the sort of mediated narratives, identities, and situations that suit our own subjective tastes and needs. The mediated experiences serve as structured game spaces, games where the rules are set out before us. But these rules are always mutable, adapted to suit subjective fancies.

In this way, the notion of play itself is a constant in our mediated lives, as we play with various identities and experiences to make the most of the structures that are proposed to us, or in other words to make these media experiences “fun.”

This project explores the notion of play as it pertains to media audiences. As Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) contends, play is an “ambiguous” concept that is hard to pin down – making the term itself playful. I will describe play as a *process* that allows for seemingly irreconcilable differences to come together, a process of convergence where rules are able to be subjectively followed and altered. Play is a process of what theorist Gilles Deleuze (1994) calls “becoming,” transcending boundaries while never fully adhering to one category or the other. The end result of play is not synthesis, as delineating precisely what play is would create a new binary of what play is not. Instead, the process is what is significant. The genre of professional wrestling serves as the perfect entry point into this dialectical process, as there are so many layers that offer the researcher potential for feedback, including within the realm of the wrestling texts, the fans of the genre, and various iterations of professional wrestling to be found within the contemporary media landscape. Due to the nature of the genre, where audience members are positioned as parts of the production and consumption of the text, as well as the way that identity is played with by both the performers themselves and the fans of wrestling, the notion of play becomes crucial in understanding the genre itself.

Furthermore, the fact that professional wrestling as a media form has such a contentious relationship to other media forms makes it the perfect case study, as wrestling exists both within and outside of the contemporary media landscape. Simultaneously accepted and reviled, a product that exists primarily on media such as television and the internet yet also has an undeniable “liveness” attached to its genesis, the genre is full of contradictions. These

contradictions must be reconciled in order to understand the genre, as well as its fans and their playful processes. And in this project, the potential to bring together wrestling's contradictions demonstrates the larger need for scholarly dialectics amongst distinct bodies of scholarship, particularly the fields of audience studies and game studies. These fields manage to address questions and limitations of the other, compensating for limitations to provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding media audiences. This dissertation puts these scholarly fields into the same discursive space, an arena where media audiences can most accurately be understood as playful. Professional wrestling demonstrates that media audiences play with the media in their lives, and it is the discursive strategies and framework of game studies that illuminate this playful process.

What is Play? – Ambiguity, Process, and Dialectics

In the previous section play was described as a process of convergence, of bringing together seemingly disparate elements. This description warrants some clarification, as the concept of play has been either ignored or abandoned in the fields of audience and game studies. This project asserts that play is an integral concept for understanding the processes of media audiences, particularly because of its ability to deconstruct seemingly opposed binary oppositions. As we shall see, many binary oppositions structure the terrain of this project, including binaries such as: fans/scholars, producers/consumers, and flavor/mechanic (to name a few). The concept of play, where people destabilize signifiers and lose themselves in representations, allows for a way to dialectically converge these binaries. Play becomes the *process to traverse* these binary oppositions. Through play these binaries may come together as

synthesized components of audience subjectivities, or be preserved and adhered to. The possibilities are subjective, but play allows for the potential to traverse these options and move beyond the binary possibilities offered by contemporary literature on media audiences. In an increasingly mediated environment, play is the most accurate way to account for the processes of media audiences who behave in various, inconsistent, and complex ways depending on the text/context/subjectivity. Play brings all of the contradictions together, a framework of media audiences that is simultaneously useful and inclusive.

Binary oppositions have structured philosophical thought since the classical times, creating unnecessary hierarchical positions within these dichotomous relations. René Descartes (1641) establishes this focus on binary oppositions in modern philosophy with his ontological argument about the existence of god and himself. Descartes presumes that *if* he is able to doubt the existence of everything *then* he must exist – “Cogito Ergo Sum” or “ I think therefore I am.” Descartes uses this line of thought to argue for the existence of an all-powerful, benevolent God because *if* he can perceive of this being *then* this God must exist as well. This God underlies the existence of all scientific knowledge for Descartes, serving as the foundation or structure of everything.

The tenets of Cartesianism were applied to the realms of linguistics and the sciences via the work of theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, who is often cited as part of the theoretical movement of Structuralism. Structuralists argue that there is an underlying structure or rules to life and culture, and this structure provides limits to the realm of possibilities within various communities or contexts. For example, de Saussure focused on linguistics and its minimal units – the signifier and signified of signs. These signs are then arranged in various syntaxes in order for communication to occur, and these syntaxes serve as the structure of all communication. The

belief in an independent structure or syntax to language, and by extension all facets of life, is the foundational tenet of Structuralism. Structuralists rely on binary oppositions to identify the underlying structure of life and culture, arguing that we use binaries such as presence-absence to discern the meaning of signs. These meaning-making processes can subsequently be explored to reveal the structure of our lives.

These binary oppositions are problematic, however, as the work of deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida (1972) demonstrates. Deconstructionists tend to “concentrate on the slippages in meaning, the gaps and inconsistencies, that inevitably mark all understanding” (Brunette, 2000, p. 89). Rather than focus on an underlying structure that is independent of context and subjectivity, Deconstructionists examine the range of possibilities in signs. The fluidity of signs is examined rather than their fixedness. Derrida in particular is critical of the binary oppositions that Structuralists, and modern philosophy in general, relied on to make meaning. Derrida argued that these binary oppositions serve to privilege one aspect of the binary over the other, as the binary relationship becomes one of power or dominance rather than something more dialectical. Derrida states that, “In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand” (1972, p. 41). This hierarchy is what theorists such as Derrida attempt to destabilize, and it is through the process of play that this hierarchical destabilization truly manifests.

The clarification of play detailed above is a bit ambiguous, which is not inconsistent with the concept itself. The inability to firmly delineate exactly what constitutes play is addressed by Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) in his *The Ambiguity of Play*. Sutton-Smith argues that, “when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little

agreement among us, and much ambiguity”(p. 1). Recognized as the foremost scholar of studying play, Sutton-Smith identifies seven rhetorics of play. Sutton-Smith uses the term “rhetorics” in order to connote the various complexities of play presented to us, containing their value systems as assumptions to be taken for granted. By using rhetoric as his categorization, Sutton-Smith is able to communicate how difficult the entire notion of defining play in its numerous forms is for scholars specializing in this field. The seven rhetorics identified by Sutton-Smith are: 1. Play as Progress (referring to the literature of developmental psychology that focuses on animals and children using play to learn and grow), 2. Play as Fate (referring to games of chance and gambling), 3. Play as Power (referring to the use of play as a representation of conflict, usually in a sporting contest), 4. Play as Identity (referring most often to festivals and celebrations within a community), 5. Play as the Imaginary (referring to the use of the imagination to create play worlds), 6. Play of the Self (referring to solitary activities like hobbies or individual thrills), and 7. Play as Frivolous (referring to play as both unproductive and foolish). These rhetorical categories demonstrate that not only is play an inclusive notion, it is also discursive. The categories are rhetorically constructed, attempts at persuasion of certain theoretical positions. According to Sutton-Smith (1995), “play has a dialectical relationship with its contexts, so do rhetoric and theory have a dialectical relationship with each other”(p. 292). For Sutton-Smith, these rhetorical categories come together as both acts of persuasion and theories of play as an inclusive process.

Play is largely ignored by scholars in the field of audience studies. As we shall see, audience studies posits several models of the media audience, but the models maintain an either/or dichotomy. These media audiences are either passive or active, either resistant or hegemonic. Play offers a framework where media audiences are both active and passive, both

resistant and hegemonic simultaneously. Game studies does take the concept of play into account, providing the vocabulary and framework for media audiences playing with media content. However, game studies has become bogged down in the role of games as texts, abandoning the concept of play early on in the field's genesis. Rather than push the concept to its theoretical potential, game studies has become too concentrated on the games/texts. This project returns the focus to the process of play, focusing on its ability to bring together these binary oppositions.

The ability of play to destabilize signifiers, to erupt binary oppositions and provide dialectical syntheses echoes Judith Butler's (1993) notion of "performativity." Butler's performativity refers to how our identities are forged "through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign"(p. 13). For Butler, performativity refers to language that accomplishes something rather than merely saying something, most famously the pronouncement of marriage at the conclusion of a wedding ceremony. Rather than merely representing something, speech acts that actually do something are performative in nature. The performative nature of communicative acts, including mediated communication, is mirrored in play. When media audiences play, they willfully bridge binary oppositions, synthesizing symbols and signs into parts of their fragmented identities. Rather than merely represent something else, or consume media that represents something else, playing with media content includes various identification processes, personally participating in the creation of content, exploring alternative scenarios, and an infinite number of other consumption processes exhibited by media audiences. And these experiences matter a great deal. Play also differs from Butler's performativity because not all play has to accomplish something. As we shall see, play can be wasteful and non-productive (Callois, 1958). This notion of whether play must accomplish something in order to be

performative and simultaneously wasteful is yet another binary that the process of play is able to alleviate.

Butler's concept of performativity is useful in its ability to move beyond language, which is binary in nature. By treating media audiences as performative we introduce the body into the performance, which cannot be reduced to language. This focus on performance places the critical emphasis on media audiences over media texts. Dwight Conquergood (1983), a performance scholar, contends that, "myths and narrative arts live in performance, not on the page"(p.2). This focus on the performative nature of media audiences allows for the emphasis to shift to the complex processes of media audiences and their relationship to language/media texts rather than situating these audiences in binary compartments. The performative processes of media audiences can be thought of as playful, subjective performances that cannot be reduced to the binary categories that dominate the field of audience studies.

Play also shares much with Carl Jung's (1913) concept of the "active imagination." As Conquergood argued above, the performance of narratives and myths lives in the performance itself rather than in language/texts. These myths are performed both consciously and unconsciously, complicating the notion of the self. Jung offers a solution to this fragmented self by claiming that the active imagination features a dialectical convergence of the conscious and unconscious mind. According to Gary Lachman (2010), the active imagination is "a method of consciously entering into a dialogue with the unconscious...brought about through the union of the conscious and unconscious minds...In the process it produces a third state more vivid and "real" than either"(http://www.realitysandwich.com/jungs_active_imagination). These two components of the self converge in Jung's framework. However, what distinguishes play from the active imagination is the notion of synthesis implicit in Jung's argument. Rather than a

synthesized self of both the unconscious and conscious mind that is more “real” than either, play emphasizes the process of “individuating” these components of the self. Jung’s notion of individuation focuses on the assimilation of the individual into a total personality, and this process differentiates the individual from others in the collective. The result is a simultaneity, an integrated whole composed of individual components – a both/and process. In order to illuminate this process, the Deleuzian concept of “becoming” proves useful.

The description of play as a process of moving past binary relations echoes Gilles Deleuze’s (1994) aforementioned concept of becoming. According to Deleuze and Guattari, becoming allows for the transcendence of boundaries without relying on a new, synthesized outcome. By focusing on the synthesis, the result is simply the creation of a new binary – the synthesis becomes the thesis and can be juxtaposed with the antithesis. Instead of the focus on the synthesis, Deleuze and Guattari contend that what matters is the process that yields the synthesis. This way you never fully get to the other side of the boundary and create a new binary relation. Catherine Malabou (1996) echoes these sentiments when discussing Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming animal when she states that, “Becoming does not come to an end in the being that has become: ‘the human being does not “really” become an animal any more than the animal “really” becomes something else...What is real is the becoming itself’(p. 124). The liberatory moment is the process of becoming, not the destination or synthesized final product. This emphasis on the process of becoming allows for the potential to traverse the binaries in the performative processes of media audiences.

This move away from dialectical synthesis distinguishes play as a concept, particularly within the field of audience studies. Rather than a directional destination toward a dialectical synthesis, play allows for a state of floating or moving within the binary relationship through a

Deleuzian becoming process. This study demonstrates how wrestling fans are able to move within these categories depending on their subjective allegiance to individual wrestlers and wrestling companies. Within the dialectical equation of “thesis+antithesis=synthesis,” the concept of play allows for media audiences to occupy any position within this equation, and for those same audience members to move to another category at will, which explodes the binary and prevents a new one from forming via the inevitable creation of a newly synthesized unit. In this way play is distinct from dialectics while still exhibiting a dialectical process.

Play is performative in nature because it destabilizes signifiers and signifieds. When playing, a person can have a sheet of paper or card represent the human form (as we shall see with *Champions of the Galaxy* in chapter 3). Or a doll made of plastic can represent a human being. Similar processes are at play when we consume media. Books are composed of signs and symbols that represent other forms and concepts. Visual media are composed of (mostly) two-dimensional representations of people and places that stand in for the “real” thing. The interpretations of these representations are always subjective and contextual, as countless audience studies have demonstrated (Bobo, 1995; Tulloch 2000). The problem remains how we, as communication scholars, interpret these consumption processes outside of the binary oppositions that permeate scholarly discourses. The process of play serves as a way out of these dead ends, offering an inclusive model of media consumption that can simultaneously account for the resistance of many media audiences and the dangers of ideological processes embedded within media texts and spaces. This process of exploding binaries and bringing together their components into a dialectical whole is exhibited prominently in professional wrestling, which serves as a case study in this project.

Autoethnography – A Wrestling Fan Comes Clean

I am a fan of professional wrestling. There, that's out in the open and we can move on. However, this analysis is designed to illustrate that being a fan of a particular genre or media text is not quite as simple as many contend. It would be more accurate to say that I am a fan of professional wrestling in theory, but in practice there are much more complex processes at work. I am also a harsh critic of the genre, based both off of what is presented to me as well as how I envision the potential of the genre. And I am most certainly not alone, as this project demonstrates. There is a long, complex history between myself and the intricate, infuriating world of professional wrestling. And this history includes multiple facets of my overall identity, as I was a fan of the genre long before this particular project began. Borrowing from Matt Hills' (2004) influential *Fan Cultures*, it is in this project's best interest to divulge my own biases and subjective positions, a sort of "autoethnography" that allows readers to fully understand my own personal relationship to this text and what tools I am bringing to this analysis.

As mentioned above, I am a fan of professional wrestling. Growing up I always faced ridicule for following such a denigrated form of entertainment. After all, professional wrestling is "fake" and everyone who follows it is a naïve imbecile unaware of the con going on. This indictment necessitates some exploration, as professional wrestling is indeed a form of con-job, as historically the goal was to find the easy "mark" in the crowd and convince him or her that the athletic endeavor undertaken in the ring was a legitimate contest (Matysik, 2009). Instead, the wrestling match, which historically took place in carnivals and over the years transitioned into venues such as arenas and stadiums, was a scripted form of entertainment where the competitors worked together to tell a narrative of perceived competition rather than an actual athletic

competition in the vein of a “true” sport. In this way, wrestling was indeed “fake,” pretending to be something it was not for the perceived purpose of fooling these “marks” out of their money. This reputation for dishonesty has plagued the genre in its various iterations since its inception, as promoters such as Vince McMahon (who runs the multi-million dollar World Wrestling Entertainment, or WWE) and Cary Silkin (who owns the independent wrestling promotion Ring of Honor, or ROH) are looked at as modern day versions of PT Barnum, famous for making false or inflated claims to lure in unsuspecting audience members.

This criticism of professional wrestling, however, is far too general and all-encompassing, as it presumes that the audience for these texts are somehow modern versions of these easy “marks,” vulnerable entities that are unaware they are being given the illusion of sport rather than actual competition. As we shall see, this is not true for many fans of professional wrestling, as the evaluative criteria employed by these fans mirrors consumption processes with other, more privileged media forms. For example, fans of high art such as Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* are not derided for being “duped” into believing the painting is an actual woman rather than a canvas with paint representing a female form. Furthermore, films directed by “auteurs” ranging from Michael Bay to Jean Luc Godard include reproductions where actors pretend to be something they are not and “play” various roles, many times including carefully choreographed fight scenes. Are these audiences equally easy “marks” that these directors are manipulating (and admittedly Bay may in fact be fooling all of us)? Instead, wrestling fans are derided for their lack of sophistication, their perceived inability to discern the “real” from the “fake.” We must examine this audience, as well as the texts and industries of professional wrestling, with the same critical eye we use for audiences of more privileged media, as similar processes are at play. In fact, professional wrestling fans acknowledge their cultural denigration

in their identity-forming processes, seemingly basking in their knowledge that they, on the whole, are much more sophisticated than many give them credit for. These are important aspects of the identity of wrestling fans and are part of how they read wrestling texts, playing with their own notions of subcultural identity formation.

These reading processes of wrestling fans influenced my research during my Master's thesis, as I explored how wrestling audiences were able to influence the direction of media producers via fan discourse and pressure. Rather than positioning this audience as a passive entity or vulnerable "marks," my research on wrestling fans exposed a level of sophistication that blurred the distinction between media producers and consumers in manner similar to Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* (2006). Instead of passively accepting the narratives posited by WWE, such as which wrestlers were pushed as main event stars and which wrestlers were not, wrestling fans exhibited a level of control over the direction of WWE's narratives. For example, in 2004 WWE pushed wrestling star Randy Orton as the top hero, or babyface, of the company to combat the top villain, or heel, Triple H. However, wrestling fans took issue with how Randy Orton was presented to them, arguing that Orton's ascension to the main event was too fast and that his character lacked the detail and motivation to fully garner the support of the fans. The resistance of these wrestling audiences led to WWE changing its planned main event of the biggest show of the year from Randy Orton challenging Triple H to Triple H defending against another performer named Dave Batista. This backlash from wrestling fans demonstrates that the audience of professional wrestling wields more power over the direction of the narratives produced by WWE, as well as a consumption process that is hardly consistent with the easy "marks" many within the culture posit for wrestling fans. As we shall see, these acts of resistance are not monolithic expressions of power, but instead are part of the play that seems to

characterize the fan community of professional wrestling at large, as over the years there are shifts in fan behavior that seem to correlate with a constant form of subcultural identity formation that resembles the play of game studies.

The Internet Wrestling Community (IWC)

This focus on subcultural identity formation shall be demonstrated through a study of the fan community of professional wrestling, particularly the fan community that manifests itself on the internet. This fan community has dubbed itself the IWC, or Internet Wrestling Community, and it is comprised of fans who demonstrate an ardent passion for the genre of professional wrestling. These fans are far removed from the easy “marks” described previously. Instead, these fans form a subculture that arranges itself hierarchically in a manner described by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (2006). The more knowledge about professional wrestling one exhibits, the more “subcultural capital” one accumulates and the more exalted their position within a particular kingdom of the IWC (Thornton, 1996). Thornton’s notion of subcultural capital, as we shall see, is based on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of cultural capital, referring to a system in place where members in a class can invest in certain practices and tastes in order to improve their cultural standing in the social hierarchy. From this perspective, it would seem that the IWC could invest in a certain set of standards and behaviors that would improve the standing of fans within this particular fan community. However, the IWC also differs on important aspects of professional wrestling, exhibiting spirited debates on definitions of success, ability, and value. This project explores these issues within the IWC, focusing on how these debates are evident of ideological conflict and reconciliatory consumption processes. In other

words, these debates are issues that fans of the genre play with, assigning their identities as fans of professional wrestling certain values and preferences that distinguish themselves as distinct from and part of particular groups simultaneously.

The specter that haunts these online discourses, however, is the perceived inadequacy of professional wrestling and all that is associated with it. As we shall see, issues within the IWC seem to spring from the derision that this genre is afforded, as each subcultural formation attempts to legitimize how their iteration of professional wrestling is acceptable in relation to the “other” iterations. Fans of WWE point to the mainstream successes of Vince McMahon’s company, citing Nielsen ratings, attendance figures, pay-per-view buyrates, and other quantifiable indicators of success. Fans of ROH, as we shall see, often point to aesthetics of the wrestling texts themselves, focusing on the athleticism associated with their staged wrestling matches. These varied approaches demonstrate the various evaluative criteria wrestling audiences employ when consuming their texts.

Textual producers equally search for a form of validation, attempting to rise above the disdain afforded to professional wrestling. For example, Vince McMahon has historically described his company as an “entertainment” company rather than a wrestling company, citing the aspects of WWE that have nothing to do with the actual genre that they exist within. In fact, McMahon passed an edict to his television announcers that they must stop referring to wrestling matches as “professional wrestling” performed by “wrestlers,” instead substituting the terms “sports entertainment” for professional wrestling and “superstars” for wrestlers (Matysik, 2009). According to Larry Matysik, “Vince McMahon has always maintained that he is first and foremost a TV producer who just happens to do wrestling (2009, 7). This example illustrates the embarrassment over professional wrestling even within the industry itself, as Vince McMahon

seems determined to minimize the significance of professional wrestling for fear of its stench infiltrating his television product. In his autobiography, professional wrestler Mick Foley (1999) highlights these public sentiments toward professional wrestling while he is lying in a hospital in Germany after losing his ear during a professional wrestling match. Foley states that:

“Lying in a hospital bed in Munich, Germany-seeing my ear being thrown into a garbage can-not being able to take it on the trip back because I didn’t know the German word for formaldehyde. And having a nurse walk into my room, looking at the piece of my body that’s lying at the bottom of the garbage, and saying, ‘Es ist alles schauspiel,’ which means ‘It’s all a big joke!’...So if they show that much respect for other patients, what made me any different? Because I was a wrestler. And professional wrestling will never be respected, no matter how many teeth I lose, no matter how many ears I lose, no matter how many brain cells have to die”(1999, 347).

And it is within this maligned context that participants in professional wrestling, as well as fans of the genre, play with their identities, creating and consuming these texts while those outside of this subculture scoff. Within this framework the tensions and defense mechanisms, the reading practices and textual generations are exposed, highlighting the peculiarities of this genre and illuminating how this genre may serve as an access point to more nuanced conceptions of audience processes in the contemporary media landscape.

It is worth exploring briefly why professional wrestling, despite its potential for illuminating complex consumption processes, is so culturally derided. Fans seem compelled to constantly defend the genre from criticism leveled by those unfamiliar with its signifying processes. And within the subcultural communities of wrestling fandom, there are constant critiques of wrestling narratives and companies. This is exacerbated by the aforementioned shame within the wrestling industry itself, as Vince McMahon, who is the most powerful entity in the entire wrestling business, seems to abhor the connotations of the term itself. The question remains as to why these feelings of guilt and shame exist within the genre. This study explores

these connotations in further detail in subsequent chapters; however, it is important to identify some structural factors that influence the genre's semantics and syntax (Altman, 1999). These factors serve as the cultural context that influences how wrestling fans and producers play with the genre of professional wrestling.

The first feature of professional wrestling that facilitates the derision the genre faces is one familiar to the field of cultural studies; the perceived class of both the wrestling audience and creators. Professional wrestling, in its many iterations, exists firmly within what Bourdieu (1984) identifies as the "popular aesthetic," referring to the working class audience of wrestling texts as opposed to a bourgeois aesthetic of formal experimentation. Bourdieu (1984) states that,

"It is as if the 'popular aesthetic' (the quotation marks are there to indicate that this is an aesthetic 'in itself' not 'for itself') were based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function...the 'popular aesthetic' ignores or refuses the refusal of 'facile' involvement and 'vulgar' enjoyment, a refusal which is the basis of the taste for formal experiment"(p.4).

As we shall see, professional wrestling is a spectacle of excess that encourages its audience to exhibit excessive (and playful) participation with the performance. This collapsing of the distance between text and spectator/consumer is a feature of the popular aesthetic described by Bourdieu, and has strong connections to class conflicts within capitalist societies. The denigration of this working class and privileging of a bourgeois aesthetic implies, and not subtly, that one mode of presentation is superior to another. Wrestling is derided for its appeal to a working class audience rather than the more "sophisticated palette" of bourgeois tastes.

We shall return to Bourdieu in the next section, but before moving on we should discuss the genre of professional wrestling as "excess" and part of what Linda Williams (1991) calls "Body Genres." Williams focuses on genres such as pornography, horror, and "weepies" by examining how these genres feature and impact the body. By attempting to elicit a sensation

from the audience via presentations of excess, Williams argues that all of these genres (and professional wrestling would be included here as well) are forms of melodrama – an historically derided genre of film known for its manipulation of the emotions of audiences. Williams states that,

“It would not be unreasonable, in fact, to consider all three of these genres under the extended rubric of melodrama, considered as a filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess that stands in contrast to more ‘dominant’ modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative. In this extended sense melodrama can encompass a broad range of films marked by ‘lapses’ in realism, by ‘excesses’ of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive... What seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion. We feel manipulated by these texts...” (1991, pp. 269-271).

These body genres all put the body on display for audiences and feature appeals to Bourdieu’s popular aesthetic, encouraging audiences to experience a visceral sensation and involvement with these texts rather than maintain an aesthetic distance encouraged by bourgeois tastes. These excessive presentations are given a proverbial dose of steroids within professional wrestling, where bodies are presented practically nude and in hyperreality. Exaggerated muscles bulge from outlandish costumes, expressions of pain and pleasure (selling) are excessively presented to fans, and morality plays are conducted within the spaces of wrestling texts. The practitioners, according to Patrice Oppliger (2004) are “hypermasculine and hyperfeminine,” as stereotypical depictions of masculinity and femininity are encoded into these bodies and subsequently presented to wrestling audiences. Presumed masculine traits such power, aggression, and virility are presented in the bodies of these performers, and in an excessive manner, clearly positioning the wrestling genre within Williams’ notion of body genres.

Finally, professional wrestling is culturally denigrated for its playful quality. As we shall see, professional wrestling exposes the playful processes of media audiences because the genre

encourages play so openly and excessively. This makes the genre a tremendous case study for this project, but also opens it up to ridicule due to the association of play with children.

Developmental and child psychology has been the most ardent supporters of studying processes of play, but by locating these processes within the domain of children it seems that all iterations of play are viewed with derision. These playful spaces are seen as something that can be grown out of in many cultural contexts, as generations view play as “not work,” meaning that one is not being productive within capitalist ideology. Scholars who have studied the presumed domains of children such as comics (Bukatman, 2003), video games (Taylor, 2006), and wrestling (Sammond, 2005) have had to endure the criticism of exploring the legitimacy of “childish” media. These genres, as we shall see, encourage the playful consumption that is masked in other media contexts, because they demand that audiences play with their content. If child psychology can take play seriously, the question remains as to why much communication scholarship struggles with this prospect. This study takes play seriously by looking at it as a model of media audiences that is encouraged by all media, but lacks the discursive arena it deserves due to the negative connotations of “childishness” that are afforded the processes of play.

Cultural and Subcultural Capital

As stated above, professional wrestling represents a perfect opportunity to explore various components of the media landscape, including how certain forms of media and those who consume it become sites of condemnation. In fact, it is within these sites of low culture and presumed audience inferiority where one can infer more complex consumption processes that stand for the whole, assuming that manifestations within fields of low culture must also be

present within more sophisticated spaces. After all, if the audience of professional wrestling is capable of subtly playing with media texts then surely consumers of objects of high culture are equally able to do the same thing. For example, consider Janice Radway's (1984) influential *Reading the Romance*, where Radway exposes the readers of romance novels as actively declaring space for themselves in the consumption of romance novels, another denigrated genre that serves as a sort of gendered parallel to professional wrestling. Rather than consuming these low culture objects as Adorno-like "cultural dupes," Radway discovers that these readers were marking consumption practices as their own time, resisting the responsibilities placed on them both socially and culturally. These romance novels and their readers become sites of ethnographic investigation and analysis, highlighting a more nuanced conception of media consumption than had previously been afforded these presumed inferior texts and audiences.

The notion that some artifacts and practices have a certain status ascribed them is the focus of Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Bourdieu examines the correlation between culture and economic capital, noting that certain practices and tastes are legitimated within society and often correspond to the accumulation of economic capital. From this perspective, one can invest in certain practices and tastes and theoretically get a return on that investment in the form of economic capital. These legitimated forms of culture are, to use Bourdieu's term, rich in "cultural capital," and these tastes and practices correspond to a social and cultural hierarchy where certain practices and subjectivities are privileged over others. This hierarchy then positions other tastes and practices as having little cultural capital, as less privileged forms of culture that offer little potential for accumulating economic capital. These low culture practices and tastes are represented well by genres such as romance novels and professional wrestling, as the consensus seems to be that producers and

consumers of these texts are less sophisticated than other media forms and audiences. As we shall see, the consumers of these texts are often positioned as vulnerable entities that need protection from the dangers of presumed low culture. Bourdieu challenges this hierarchy by arguing that there is nothing inherently inferior about objects of low culture. Instead, Bourdieu argues that the distinctions between high and low culture merely represent the tastes that are privileged over those that are not. The tastes of those in positions of power, in an attempt to maintain their exalted position in society, legitimize certain practices and tastes that those in other socioeconomic sectors do not have access to – the opera for example. The tastes of the masses are positioned as inferior, as exemplifying low culture, whereas the tastes of societal elites are privileged and exemplify high culture.

The constructed nature of societal distinctions between high and low culture is echoed by Dick Hebdige (1979) in his exploration of subcultural style. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige explores how subcultures challenge the dominant ideology by exposing how society's codes are the result of conscious choices rather than any natural processes. Using the codes of punk rock as his example, Hebdige points to how members of this subcultural movement are able to reinterpret artifacts of the dominant culture and use them for unexpected purposes. For example, Hebdige examines how a safety pin can be repurposed into a piece of jewelry within this subculture. Members of the subculture recognize the safety pin as an accessory to be worn rather than a functional tool, exhibiting the codes that are accepted within that particular subcultural group. Moreover, the safety pin is being used in a manner completely different from how mainstream society recognizes the object. This repurposing exposes how the codes and rules of society are arbitrary constructions, a set of guidelines designed to maintain the status quo rather than any natural or inherent distinctions between right and wrong. This

repurposing is, according to Hebdige, dangerous to mass culture since it exposes the constructedness of ideological codes of conduct and order. The response of mass culture is an attempt to restore order, positioning subcultural style as the maneuverings of social deviants or reincorporating the subcultural style into mainstream culture – selling it back to various subcultures and neutralizing its political efficacy. This hegemonic battle between mass culture and subcultural style represents both the arbitrary and constructed nature of cultural distinctions between high and low, as well as how certain groups respond to challenges to their social order. As we shall see, similar processes are at work within the confines of professional wrestling's fan community, as they both search for legitimacy and cultural capital and attempt to distinguish themselves from other groups by establishing certain codes or utterances of subcultural style.

John Fiske (1992) appropriates the proposed theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu in his article, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom." Fiske maintains that fan cultures represent a form of subculture, mirroring the manifestations of subcultural style described previously by Hebdige and his analysis of punk rock. These fan cultures, according to Fiske, organize themselves in a manner similar to Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital. Rather than investing in traditional instances of high art, or texts associated with the accumulation of cultural capital, Fiske argues that fan cultures immerse themselves in artifacts of popular culture, or cultural texts associated with mass culture rather than more bourgeois sensibilities. Fiske maintains that there is a dual reason for this selection of popular texts as the objects of fandom for these subcultures. First of all, Fiske argues that these fans are often disconnected from the avenues of access to high culture. Their tastes are not easily converted into economic capital, forcing these fan cultures to organize themselves outside of the cultural hierarchy in a capitalist society. Secondly, fans of popular culture texts often form personal attachments to the objects

of their fandom and participate in fan production processes. These fan-produced texts, as well as the knowledge about the text that inspires the fandom, substitute for the cultural capital described by Bourdieu. These fan cultures organize themselves hierarchically, except their cultural capital is detached from the economic capital of Bourdieu's framework. Instead, fan cultures use knowledge about particular popular culture texts, as well as fan-produced texts, to determine the stratification of their specific subculture.

This stratification of fan cultures is explored by Sarah Thornton (1996) in *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. Thornton designates the term "subcultural capital" to substitute for Bourdieu's cultural capital when examining the hierarchical organization of specific subcultures. In particular, Thornton states that subcultural capital represents an attainable status within particular subcultural formations, as the knowledge one exhibits determines the hierarchical position of that person within the particular subculture. These subcultural formations mirror the hierarchical structuring of mainstream society, but rather than investing in traditional iterations of cultural capital that will translate to economic capital, these members of a subculture invest in their own subculture and ascend the hierarchy of their subculture. Henry Jenkins (2006) explores similar processes in *Convergence Culture*, focusing on how online communities become "knowledge communities" where one can improve one's status within the community by exhibiting the most knowledge about a particular artifact of popular culture. These processes demonstrate that fans of various media texts have instituted their own economy in terms of the consumption of media texts, assigning value to particular exhibitions of knowledge that is worth a tremendous amount in certain contexts (within a particular subculture) but is not necessarily transferable to traditional societal structures.

The notion that certain knowledge and information is more valuable within subcultures than in a capitalist society that values economic capital reflects the tenuous position of fandom within society. Joli Jenson (1992) explores the maligned notion of fandom in her essay, “Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization.” Jenson argues that too often fans are characterized as either “obsessive loners” or members of “an hysterical crowd.” In this way, fans are deemed social deviants, signifiers of excess that have an unhealthy relationship to whatever inspires their devotion. These fans are reduced within this framework to manifestations of Hebdige’s utterances of subcultural style, as fans must be either cast out as social pariahs or reincorporated in order to demonstrate that the disruption is not dangerous at all. However, Jenson argues that these characterizations of fans represent attempts to legitimize certain consumption processes over others, mirroring the processes identified by Bourdieu. Fandom itself becomes a form of taste, a manner of consumption that is deemed inappropriate because of its potential to challenge dominant ideologies. The ways that fans play with their media texts, producing their own versions or accumulating vast amounts of knowledge and reorganizing themselves in new hierarchies, is seen as challenging to typical structural formations. This challenge is met by positioning the fan as abnormal, as deviant.

My project maintains instead that fan practices are normal processes of media audiences. Rather than exceptional, the play afforded to fans can be expanded to include all forms of media consumption. These consumption processes may be ideologically limited, discouraged by mainstream society as unhealthy or inappropriate. But these are taught behaviors, ideologically conditioned consumption processes that we learn over time. As we shall see, we can conceptualize the audience as playing with media within this ideological framework, assuming certain identities in certain media moments and discarding others. In essence, audiences are

playful with their media experiences, even if they are in variable states of shame regarding the potential of their play in relation to what is and is not appropriate.

Fans and Theoretical Conceptions of the Audience

Communication studies has spent a considerable amount of time and scholarship examining media audiences. There have been four models of the media audience that position these audiences as having progressively more power in the relationship between media producers and consumers. The first three models conceptualize the audience as being passive, active, and creative respectively. Recent studies focusing on the media audience posit a fourth model where media audiences are moving towards a more participatory relationship with media creation, integrating their desires and tastes with the actual production of media products. Although this participatory audience model is a recent development in communication scholarship, these conceptions of the audience are not intended to suggest a chronological timeline. Instead, these models of audience consumption processes refer to the development of unique critical perspectives of the media audience, each positing a greater role of the audience in the creation of media texts. These four models all propose either/or dichotomies, however, envisioning the media audience as either active or passive, for example. I propose that the concept of play can bring together each of these four models, positing a media audience that is capable of being active, passive, creative, and participatory. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these models all come together within the paradigm of play.

The first model of media audiences and their consumption practices positions the audience as passive consumers of media texts. This model is commonly referred to as the

“Effects Model” and is championed by many social scientists attempting to link media representations of societal ills with any manifestations of those ills in society. This notion of the passive audience has origins in the Frankfurt School and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1947), particularly their notion of the “culture industry.” In “The Culture Industry Reconsidered,” Adorno claims that, “the total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment...becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves”(1991, p. 60). From this perspective, media texts impose their will on media audiences, positioning the audience as being duped by media producers and unaware of their own subjugation. This notion of the culture industry is carried on by many media scholars that warn of the dangerous effects of mass media in terms of creating an uninformed society that is in a state of Marxian false consciousness (for example, see Robert McChesney’s (2004) *The Problem of the Media*).

The model of the passive audience is prevalent within the social sciences that are concerned about the dangers of consuming certain forms of media content – most often the consumption of “excessive” violence and sexuality. The fear is that the audience is not only passive in nature and therefore unable to resist these mediated messages, but also that they are vulnerable entities that could potentially be corrupted by this controversial content. For example, Fredric Wertham (1955) warned of the dangers of consuming comics in *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham argued that these comics posed a threat to children (and by extension any one who came into contact with them) and must be censored. Wertham’s vitriol against the comics industry led to the industry adopting a code of self-censorship rather than being regulated by the federal government, signaling a stark victory for unfounded fear-mongering and a model

of the media audience as vulnerable children that are incapable of resisting media messages. These vulnerable entities presumably passively absorb all messages inscribed in media texts, making them susceptible to brainwashing and desensitization. As we shall see, this model is grossly inadequate for understanding the complex reading practices employed by media audiences and is too often used as a tool for censorship and as a regulator of taste. The field of cultural studies has made extraordinary progress in dispelling the myth of the passive audience model, but many outside of the field still conceptualize the audience as lacking agency in the consumption of media texts, pointing to the dangerous effects of mass media on vulnerable consumers.

The advances within the field of cultural studies represent the second model of media audiences. Scholars such as Stuart Hall (1973) and David Morley (1992) present crucial modifications of the passive audience model envisioned by the social sciences. Rather than positioning the media audience as passive recipients of mediated messages, scholars within the field of cultural studies, and in particular the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, argue that audiences take a more active role in the ways that media texts are both read and used in culture. These “active” audience members are capable of resisting the dominant messages inscribed in media texts, increasing the agency of the audience in relation to the producers of media texts. Hall argues that audiences can “decode” media messages in one of three ways: they can decode the message in a dominant manner that is consistent with the intended message of the media producer, they can decode the message in a resistant manner that features the rejection of the intended message of the media producer, or they can decode in a negotiated manner that features some contextualization of the media message in relation to the audience member’s subjective identity (Hall, 1973). These classifications of reading practices greatly complicate the more top-

down approach of the passive audience model. Rather than passively consuming media messages in the manner intended by media producers, the focus here becomes acts of resistance and negotiation, highlighting the active role the audience plays in the consumption process.

This agency afforded media audiences became an influential theme in cultural studies, as scholars such as John Fiske (1989) and Jacqueline Bobo (1995) presented influential studies that focused on various media audiences resisting the intended messages of media producers. In fact, many within the contemporary field of cultural studies argue that too much praise was heaped on media audiences, resulting in a celebration of an all-powerful media audience that is capable of resisting the ideological processes of mediated messages (Ang, 1996; Tulloch, 2000). Fiske's logic suggests that there is no need to worry, as we were all capable of resisting the hegemonic processes of media messages, no longer bound by class differences and political machinations. This criticism has validity, as there should certainly be great attention paid to the ideological constraints of media consumption. But there are also numerous examples of audiences resisting these ideological messages and constraints, as scholars such as Fiske (1989) have demonstrated. The recent Fiske Matters academic conference reflects this growing divide within the academy of Fiske's legacy to audience studies, as many scholars gathered in 2010 to debate the merit of Fiske's polysemic audience.

I assert that the concept of play provides a dialectical approach that integrates the assertions of Fiske with his critics, accounting for both the possibility of audience resistance as well as the ideological constraints that structure consumption of media messages. This project focuses on the potential, rather than the presumption, that all audiences are capable of playing with the media content they consume, even if they are ideologically encouraged to not play with it at all for fear of being labeled deviants. In this way, the concept of play offers us a dialectical

way out of the dilemma that plagues the field of audience studies, as audiences can be ideologically constrained *and* resistant “bricoleurs.” Play accounts for the potential of active, resistant readers while simultaneously accepting the potential of passive, hegemonic subjects. Within its properties are the conditions that make resistance possible, and at the same time play can be structured by rules. The process of play is one of fluidity, where the marks of resistance and domination are always signified. These destabilized signifiers can be applied to audience studies in order to synthesize seemingly irreconcilable discourses such as the legacy of Fiske.

The third model of media audiences affords the audience even more power in the relationship between media producers and consumers. Appropriating Michel de Certeau’s (1984) model of “textual poaching,” Henry Jenkins (1992) conceptualizes the audience as being creative participants in the relationship between textual producers and consumers. Jenkins examines the ways that media audiences become creative producers themselves, producing works of fan fiction that extend the narratives produced by media producers. This theoretical conception of the media audience as creative complicates the relationship between media producers and consumers further, as rather than having rigid distinctions between these two groups there are now opportunities for media audiences to shift into the role of media producer in certain situations and create their own iterations of media texts.

Jenkins’ (1992) influential *Textual Poachers* features examinations of fan practices including writing “slash” fiction and “filking.” These practices extend beyond the narratives created by the media producers, residing within the fan community as iterations of subcultural capital. In this way they are distinct from the “official” narratives of media producers. Media producers have access to media outlets such as television stations, film studios, and so on. Fan-produced media texts lack this access to traditional media outlets, instead residing on the

periphery of mainstream culture. In this way, these practices become subcultural, expressions of style that have value within certain circles but remain outside of mass culture. These works of fan fiction are distributed to much smaller audiences at fan conventions and over the internet. This focus on the periphery is a critique that has been leveled at Jenkins and his model of the “creative” audience, as his examples are exceptional rather than the norm or representative of media consumption at large (Tulloch, 2000; Hills, 2004). However, these examples of a creative audience once again provide a glimpse of the potential of media audiences to play with the content they are provided and do something unique or personal. While not necessarily representative of all media consumption due to its marginality, it is a form of play that is similar to other forms of play that are explored in this analysis. In fact, it is because of its marginality that this creative audience manifested itself, as Jenkins was able to identify ideologically maligned audience practices such as slash fiction that are often looked down on by people outside of these fan communities. These practices stand out from more bourgeois consumption practices because of their perceived deviance, serving as the foundation for this analysis of playful media audiences. These instances identified by Jenkins become the extreme examples of play that characterize media consumption, marking the need for more comprehensive analyses that focus not only on the periphery but also on all media consumption processes.

Henry Jenkins (2006) himself compensates for the critique of his creative audience model in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. In this book, Jenkins argues that the media audience is taking their creativity and applying it to more mainstream iterations of media consumption, influencing media producers in an unprecedented manner due to the access granted to them by digital technology. According to Jenkins (2006), we are in a state of convergence that refers to, “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation

between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want”(p. 2). This convergence represents an historical moment where media audiences are able to operate within the mainstream of media producers, exerting influence on the kinds of media products they want and the direction of media narratives. Another aspect of this convergence is that many media producers are also fans who have migrated into positions of power within the contemporary media landscape. These fans are able to look at media products not only as commerce but also with the eyes of media audiences who have attachments and identities tied to the media images they are now helping to shape. In this way, the contemporary media landscape features media producers and consumers playing with the media images and messages that are ubiquitous in our culture. No longer a top-down model of media consumption, this new conceptualization of the media audience features the potential to play with media products in every way, from the production to the consumption of the media text. The concept of play pushes Jenkins’ fourth model of the media audience as participatory with the production of media even further, as it suggests the very distinction between producer and consumer is simultaneously breaking down, as Jenkins suggests, and manifesting itself in new ways. As we shall see, the genre of professional wrestling serves as a case study where distinctions between producer and consumer are eliminated in many instances and exhibited in others. Rather than do away with the boundaries, they become fluid and manifest themselves in various contexts. In this way, the categories become destabilized signifiers, able to be applied in the right situations and contexts.

Another aspect of this era of media convergence is the emergence of critical ethnography that examines the practices of media audiences. For example, Matt Hills (2002) explores the similarities (and differences) between fans and scholars, arguing that our conception of each

must be maintained. According to Hills, “fan-scholars” are fans that possess an extraordinary amount of knowledge about a specific text, making them similar to an academic scholar who is an expert in a given field. “Elite fans become in effect scholars of their idols”(Hills, 2002, p. 17). “Scholar-fans,” on the other hand, are academics that are also fans of a particular genre or text. Hills argues these scholar-fans must maintain a level of distance or distinction from the object of their fandom so to conform to the expected identity of the academic. Hills claims that:

“For example, I am able to work as an academic despite (or rather, because of) having been a fan of cult TV and science fiction all my life only because I present an identity which conforms to institutional expectations. I give lectures which refer to academic books (most of the time), I offer arguments for and against theoretical positions, I use a specific academic language, and I possess the qualifications which are required of me professionally...Any and all attempts at hybridizing and combining ‘fan’ and ‘academic’ identities/subjectivities must therefore remain sensitive to those institutional contexts which disqualify certain ways of speaking and certain ways of presenting the self”(p. 20).

Hills seems to identify primarily with the role of the scholar, identifying himself as a scholar-fan, giving the position of privilege to the scholar portion of his identity by placing it before the hyphen. His analysis makes tremendous strides in the field of audience studies because it legitimizes the knowledge within fan communities as analogous to the cultural capital of a scholar. Hills’ approach also suggests a dialectical reconciliation between these partial identities of fans and scholars, demonstrating that these categories on their own are insufficient for explaining the practices of fan cultures, as well as academics. However, his distinction between fan-scholar and scholar-fan exposes some curious connotations. By Hills’ account, scholar-fans are scholars who can behave like fans in certain situations and fan-scholars are fans who build up knowledge about a subject in a manner similar to an academic scholar. However, it appears that these identities are never fully merged, or to use Jenkins’ term these identities never fully converge. Instead, they always seem at odds, contextualizing the other and asserting the

dominant position in the identity of a given individual. Fan-scholars and scholar-fans cannot “properly” traverse between these two categories due to institutional and perhaps cultural restraints. In this way, fans and scholars are always distinct, never fully convergent into a single form or identity. We shall return to this problematic dichotomy in the next section, but for now I propose a dialectical reconciliation of these two identities that goes beyond Hills’ proposal. Audience studies ultimately requires a full convergence between partial identities to explore how these perspectives are representative of a total individual, as well as how an individual subject is able to play with these partialities.

T.L. Taylor (2006) demonstrates the importance of merging the identities of being a fan and a scholar in her book *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Borrowing the anthropological methodology of ethnography, Taylor takes part in a game convention for *EverQuest* and is afforded unprecedented access to what this community values. Rather than attempt to maintain objective distance, which is a problem in anthropology we will return to later, Taylor relies on her familiarity with the game and those she plays the game with online to help her ethnographic research. She makes the startling claim that she observes members at the game convention mimic the behaviors of their online personas, allowing for the “real to imitate the virtual”(Taylor, 2006, p. 5). Taylor is both a fan and a scholar in her exploration of the online community of *EverQuest*, embodying the sort of ethnographic experience advocated by Clifford Geertz (1973) in his “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.”

Geertz, in his study of the role of the cockfight in Balinese society, discovers that the intricacies of the Balinese rituals remain concealed until he actually runs from the police with those he is studying while at a cockfight. Prior to this experience, Geertz was firmly positioned as an outsider in Balinese culture. In this moment of authenticity when he ran from the police,

however, Geertz behaved like some one from this culture, and subsequently he was no longer treated as if he was “invisible”(1973, p. 513). According to Geertz, this ethnographic experience “demonstrated our solidarity with what were now our covillagers”(p. 513). Taylor experienced a similar level of ethnographic clarity, as her access to the fan community of *EverQuest* was complemented by her solidarity with this community, exposing her to information and experiences that would have remained hidden had she simply approached her study in the sole role of a scholar. Similarly, Taylor’s study demonstrates the importance of online communities in the assessment of media consumption, as these fan practices serve as excellent sources of data and analysis when attempting to assess how media audiences are currently consuming media content. And these online communities are also representative of the play that is part of the media audience, as online personas are created and played with at a fantastic rate. As we shall see in this study, play is an integral part of identity construction in both the real and virtual worlds, and it is the missing component of these various conceptions of the media audience. Furthermore, the genre of professional wrestling encourages this sort of play, and serves as an excellent gateway into how contemporary media audiences are playfully consuming media messages.

The Genre of Professional Wrestling

An exploration of the critical scholarship on the genre of professional wrestling necessitates several detours since there is a paucity of actual research on these texts. This is possibly the result of professional wrestling’s less-than-stellar position within the cultural hierarchy. This genre provides an excellent case study of media reception that offers potential

syntheses of theoretical models of the media audience – particularly through the notion of play. In order to understand the generic conventions of professional wrestling we must examine the genre's specific codes and signifying processes. This exploration follows Rick Altman's (1999) semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to genre study from the field of film studies, focusing on a genre's structural building blocks, or its semantics, and the arrangement of those building blocks within a generic text, or its syntax. Altman adds pragmatics to this framework in order to account for how audiences actually use genres, and we shall return to the pragmatics of professional wrestling after a brief exploration of the genre's semantics and syntax.

Perhaps the most controversial convention of the wrestling genre is the fact that professional wrestling is scripted entertainment, or to use wrestling jargon professional wrestling is a "work" (Matysik, 2009). Matysik, who has been involved in the wrestling industry in various capacities since 1963, describes professional wrestling by saying,

"Is it a show? Absolutely. Do wrestlers get hurt, or worse? Unfortunately, too often. Are lives changed, for better or worse? Yes. Does it have the respect it deserves from the media and parts of the public? No, not even close to what it deserves. Professional wrestling is a work. I guess that means it resides in some never-never land between real and not real" (2009, p. 3).

This description is confounding for many, especially those not familiar with the conventions of the genre. Far too often, critics of professional wrestling attempt to inform fans that wrestling is "fake" in order to dissuade their allegiance to the genre. But as we shall see, the audience of professional wrestling willfully suspends their disbelief in order to enjoy these texts. This dismissal of wrestling as "fake" is not a fair characterization of the genre as a whole, as it greatly underestimates the complexities of the genre's signifying practices. This is an issue that most denigrated genres must deal with, as critics often deride the genre simply by asking it to do something that is not part of the genre's semantics or syntax. For example, Robert Allen (1985),

in his book *Speaking of Soap Operas*, argues that the genre of daytime soap operas is often derided by critics who have no knowledge about the genre's conventions. Allen argues that in order to understand this maligned genre one must examine its specific generic conventions, as well as its unique production practices and audience consumption processes. Similarly, the genre of professional wrestling must be examined in its specificity, focusing on what professional wrestling does rather than what it fails to do that other genres accomplish. For example, ESPN radio host Colin Cowherd sparked controversy in 2005 for proclaiming the death of professional wrestler Eddie Guerrero did not deserve mention in the Sports section of the newspaper because professional wrestlers are neither athletes nor participants in competitive sports (Martin, 2005). This example is representative of the disdain for professional wrestling by many in mainstream culture because it is generically distinct from sports and scripted entertainment, a generic hybrid that borrows from the conventions of genres like sports and melodrama while arranging these conventions in distinct syntactic patterns.

Professional wrestling matches are scripted, meaning that the outcomes and maneuvers of professional wrestling matches are predetermined. There is no actual competition in the ring in terms of who is going to emerge victorious in a particular match, as wrestlers are informed ahead of time who will emerge victorious and by what means the match will end. From there wrestlers are often left to construct a match on their own or with the help of an agent or booker (writer), depending on the company and the performers' strengths and weaknesses. The variety of wrestling maneuvers that performers execute in a match serve as examples of the genre's semantics, as different performers can perform these maneuvers or actions and they make sense within the context of a wrestling encounter. Outside of the diegetic universe of professional wrestling, these same maneuvers would seem absurd, but within the realm of professional

wrestling the performance of certain wrestling moves (to say nothing for the costumes and gestures of professional wrestlers) is completely consistent with the conventions of the genre. The infinite possibilities that wrestlers arrange their maneuvers, theoretically building the match around the villain getting “heat” on the hero until the hero makes his or her comeback, represent the genre’s syntax. Audiences recognize the performances of wrestlers and their most feared or potent maneuvers in the context of the staged match, as these certain actions generate different emotions in the crowd. The scripted nature of professional wrestling ensures the creation and execution of particular narratives within the diegesis of professional wrestling, sucking the viewer into the narrative.

Another generic convention of professional wrestling is the categorization of wrestling characters within the diegesis of the text. Wrestling characters are usually categorized into two camps, babyfaces and heels. These terms are wrestling jargon for heroes and villains respectively. The diegetic narratives of professional wrestling are often structured so that the babyfaces, or heroes, are faced with seemingly insurmountable odds and they must overcome the diabolical actions of their evil opponents. The heels, meanwhile, are the villains who will resort to any action necessary in order to win their matches and pursue their own selfish interests. As we shall see, wrestling scholarship has linked this struggle between babyfaces and heels to concepts such as justice and suffering (Barthes, 1957). According to Barthes, professional wrestling is an exaggerated spectacle that conveys to the audience these concepts of justice and suffering, making clear that each character metaphorically embodies either good or evil. The babyface must undergo suffering in his struggle against evil, ensuring that his eventual triumph will have a resounding impact with the crowd when it occurs. This triumph ideologically restores the social order, conveying the concept of justice by punishing those who threaten the

rules of society. Of course, this is but one reading of the wrestling text, and wrestling audiences play with this reading in intriguing ways.

The scripted nature of professional wrestling becomes intrinsically important to the genre's signifying processes, as it ensures that this proposed struggle between good and evil plays out over a structured narrative. For example, the first meeting between a babyface and heel would potentially feature the heel winning the match via nefarious means in order to "steal" a victory. This disputed finish leads to the babyface character seeking revenge for the tainted loss, setting up a simple narrative within the diegesis of professional wrestling. The scripting of the outcome of the first match naturally leads to successive rematches between the characters. In addition, the diegetic conclusion of this narrative is for the babyface to eventually earn a victory over the heel, restoring the social order and proving that nefarious means are not rewarded. If this narrative was not constructed in advance, or the competition was real (or to use wrestling jargon a "shoot"), then there is no guarantee that the heel would receive his comeuppance at the conclusion of the diegetic narrative, breaking the rules of melodrama that professional wrestling borrows from.

In addition to the scripted nature of the diegetic narratives of professional wrestling, the genre also features the illusion of sport or athletic competition. Wrestlers must work together to provide the illusion of competition, making the staged match look as real as possible so that audiences are able to suspend their disbelief during the match and so that wrestlers are not injured during the execution of a match. The process of creating the illusion of competitive sport is very dangerous to the wrestlers, as one wrong move could have serious repercussions and lead to paralysis or death. Mick Foley's (1999) autobiography provides a detailed account of how wrestling matches are constructed to look real, as Foley is a professional wrestler that took pride

in the aesthetics of his performances. Foley goes into specific detail of how certain maneuvers have had serious repercussions for his quality of life, listing the numerous injuries he sustained throughout his years of wrestling. The genre of professional wrestling attempts to draw the audience in via the use of blood in wrestling matches, and Foley goes into great detail about how wrestlers use razor blades to slice their foreheads open, allowing the sweat to mix with the blood so that it looks more voluminous to the audience. The genre of professional wrestling also uses a unique nomenclature for specific maneuvers that signify to the audience that the match may be ending, what is commonly referred to as a “finishing maneuver.” Names such as “The Pedigree” and “Cattle Mutilation” in the context of everyday life mean something completely different than they do if a wrestling announcer states that some one is applying one of these moves. In this context, these maneuvers signify the potential conclusion of a wrestling match, sucking the audience into the drama to see if the encounter is really over.

These generic conventions provide little information on audience pragmatics, however. And audiences are crucial components of the wrestling spectacle, as they are present in original staging as well as consumers who play with the content once it is recorded and distributed. The presence of the live audience when wrestling matches are performed complicates the boundaries between performer and observer, as the audience becomes an integral component of the wrestling text. Lawrence Levine (1988), in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, chronicles the process of live audiences blurring the boundaries between performer and observer. Levine examines the staging of Shakespearian plays in the United States during the 1800s and states that, “more than an audience; they are participants who can enter into the action on the field, who feel a sense of immediacy and at times even of control, who articulate their feelings vocally and unmistakably”(1988, p. 26). Levine goes on to describe how audiences can impact the staging of

the plays themselves, offering an example of an audience rejecting a performance of a play by hurling vegetables at the performers who failed to meet their expectations. This example is significant as it demonstrates the ability of the live audience to greatly impact the production of a particular text. This kind of audience participation is a regular feature of professional wrestling matches. For example, in the independent wrestling organization Ring of Honor, a performer known as Jimmy Rave was commonly greeted with rolls of toilet paper hurled at him during his entrance, signifying the audience's disdain for the character he plays (although this was also ceremonial in nature and came to be a great source of joy for fans). This participation of the live audience highlights the importance of wrestling's "liveness," as this facet of the genre provides the opportunity for an added layer of data and feedback to the texts produced by wrestling organizations. These live fans can impact individual matches as well as the placement of certain characters within the diegetic universe of the wrestling text, as characters with more "heat" gain more airtime and attain higher placement in the hierarchy of performers, meaning they earn more money due to their participation in marquee matches and narratives.

The generic conventions of professional wrestling demonstrate the importance of the audience in the presentation and consumption of wrestling texts. Furthermore, the participation of the audience becomes a site of play, as audiences play along with their prescribed roles. As we shall see, audiences often boo characters that they actually like because it is part of the diegesis of the wrestling spectacle. Similarly, audiences can also boo wrestlers they are supposed to cheer for based on their role in the diegesis. The variety of performative options available to the audience represents the range of identities the audience can play with during the presentation of wrestling texts. This play, both in the live performance and in its mediated form,

demonstrates the necessity of an audience model that can be active and creative, convergent and ideologically situated simultaneously and at different moments.

Professional Wrestling Scholarship by Academics, Journalists, and Fans

The majority of the scholarly discourse on professional wrestling adheres to the “Effects” model of media consumption, focusing on the potential dangers the consumption of this maligned genre could pose for vulnerable audiences. These social scientific studies posit a passive audience that is in danger of harming themselves and others due to their exposure to these denigrated texts. For example, Woo and Kim (2003) argue that professional wrestling serves as a locale for “antisocial” behavior and could cause greater harm to vulnerable audiences than other forms of media. To their credit, these scholars expand their analysis from only the wrestling matches themselves to include all components of the televised text, specifically focusing on what they label “nonmatch time”(Woo & Kim, 2003). Nonmatch time refers to the inclusion of recorded segments such as backstage interviews, elaborate introductions, and all of the other components of the wrestling text that does not include the simulated wrestling matches. This study expands the semantics and syntax of the genre, accounting for generic conventions that are often overlooked in critical discourse about professional wrestling. Similarly, Tamborini et al. (2005) perform a quantitative analysis of the levels of violence depicted in televised wrestling texts. Unsurprisingly, the authors discover that professional wrestling features a significantly higher amount of depictions of violence than other television texts, arguing that this preponderance of violence poses a greater risk of harm for susceptible viewers than other media content.

The two studies referenced above are typical of the social scientific research on professional wrestling, as well as the social sciences' focus on media and its effects on audiences. These studies embody the first generation of media scholarship on audiences referenced previously, positioning the audience as passive receivers of mediated messages that lack the agency or power to resist or subjectively interpret the content that they are exposed to. As we shall see, content analyses such as these offer one reading of these media texts, a hegemonic or ideologically constrained message that audiences lack the power or sophistication to resist. However, these models fail to account for the potential of audience members to resist these texts, or to use them as inspiration for creating texts of their own. Ultimately, these effects studies fail to provide the opportunity for play by media audiences who may consume these programs in various complexities. The wrestling audience is simultaneously confounding and inspirational, and it is only through the notion of play that we can hope to reconcile these apparent contradictions.

Outside of social scientific analyses of professional wrestling that posit the wrestling audience as passive entities, scholarship of professional wrestling has centered on textual analyses of iterations of the genre. Specifically, Roland Barthes' (1957) influential "The World of Wrestling" serves as the canon for scholarship on wrestling's unique signifying processes. Barthes performs a semiotic analysis of professional wrestling in French society during the 1950s, exploring how the genre communicates or signifies to its audience. This semiotic analysis is a precursor to Barthes *S/Z* (1970) project on narrative structure, as Barthes explores the signifying processes of texts in order to identify deeper structures of narrative itself. In *S/Z*, Barthes identifies five codes that operate in all narratives, establishing a basic structure that readers are then able to interpret. Barthes argues that wrestling's signifying processes are

ideological, serving as a cultural mythology where concepts such as “suffering and justice” are presented in their “absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot”(1957, 24). This ideology is designed to communicate certain moralities to the audience, identifying which personality traits and behaviors are acceptable or desirable while simultaneously reviling other characteristics presented in wrestling texts. Barthes contends that wrestling is a spectacle, complete with excessive gestures, bodies, and signifying processes, recalling our earlier discussion of body genres such as melodrama. This focus on excess ensures that audiences understand the spectacle, as nothing is left vague to potentially misinterpret and confound the ideological message of the texts. The displays are extreme and excessive, but for Barthes the morality play of the genre must be made absolutely clear. For example, Barthes provides the wrestler of Thauvin, whom Barthes identifies as a “bastard” but would be labeled a “heel” in contemporary wrestling terminology. Thauvin, according to Barthes, is immediately recognized as repugnant, his body lacking the musculature of his more heroic counterparts. This repugnant body signifies to audiences that he is not someone to be emulated. Instead Thauvin’s body is a foil to the more chiseled features of the hero. Furthermore, Thauvin displays acts of cowardice as the “bastard,” acts that necessitate him “paying” for his sins at the hands of the hero, or babyface to use contemporary wrestling terminology. This example clarifies what Barthes means by his claim that wrestling makes legible moral concepts within its textual structures. The concept of justice is made evident, as Thauvin must be defeated to restore the moral order of both wrestling’s diegesis and the world outside of this diegetic universe.

Barthes’ influential analysis represents one reading of wrestling texts from over fifty years ago, but it is important to note that this is but one reading of these texts. Furthermore, wrestling has changed a considerable amount since 1957, to say nothing for its various iterations

across different cultures. Henry Jenkins (1997), in “Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama,” updates the semiotic analysis of professional wrestling offered by Barthes. Jenkins focuses on the genre’s role in American culture in the early 1990s and argues that professional wrestling presents extreme versions of both “good and evil” with no shades of grey. Jenkins states:

“This public declaration ensures the constant moral legibility of the WWF narrative and thereby maximizes the audience’s own emotional response. Spectators come to the arena or turn on the programs to express intense emotion – to cheer the hero, to boo and jeer the villain without moral ambiguity or emotional complexity”(1997, p. 49).

Jenkins equates the genre of professional wrestling to melodrama in film in that it manifests itself in times of ideological crisis. Wrestling for Jenkins seems to be an act of recuperation or repair, ideologically positioning or framing audiences in a manner that restores the social order from a momentary disruption. There are clear delineations of good and evil so as to eliminate any confusion about where audience members should stand in the ideological struggle. Again, this is only one interpretation of wrestling texts. Audiences may not read these texts in a manner consistent with this encoded message. As we shall see, wrestling fans play with their identities and allegiances as they consume and take part in wrestling texts, cheering different characters for reasons that may have nothing to do with their moral legibility. In fact, Barthes and Jenkins must both be understood as one interpretation of a specific representation of wrestling in a particular historical context. French wrestling in the 1950s (Barthes) and WWF wrestling in the early 1990s (Jenkins) are but one iteration of wrestling texts, as the genre has a multitude of possibilities for fans to identify with, to say nothing of the multitude of reading processes available to these audiences. These analyses also ignore important aspects of the wrestling text, particularly the extra-diegetic discourses that fans use as part of their evaluative criteria.

Sharon Mazer (1998) begins to open up the possibility for alternative readings of wrestling texts in “Real Wrestling/Real Life,” arguing that Barthes’ focus on moral clarity is actually challenged in the wrestling universe. Mazer states that, “Professional wrestling’s moral universe is, in fact, imbued with essential contradictions within and between the fiction of the play and the fact of the business”(1998, 70). According to Mazer, the savvy wrestling fan demonstrates a desire for more ambiguous characters, mirroring the moral uncertainty of life outside of wrestling’s diegetic universe. Furthermore, Mazer argues that it is this ambiguity that lies at the heart of wrestling’s appeal. Rather than serve as a morality play for ideological purposes, professional wrestling offers its fans an opportunity to search for something real. Mazer states that,

“The interplay between the real and the fake is what generates much of the heat in wrestling. The pleasure for wrestlers and spectators alike may be found in the expressive tension between the spontaneous and the rehearsed, in the anticipation of, and acute desire for, the moment when the real breaks through the pretended ...wrestling’s spectators and performers alike are in a position to enjoy the distancing effect that comes with knowing the formal aspects of the performance at the same time as they look for the moment when knowledge (or consciousness) is suspended, penetrated by the rush for something far more urgent and demanding than artifice” (1998, p. 68).

This analysis of wrestling texts focuses on how audiences of the genre actively search for moments when they are pulled into the diegetic universe, when they cannot tell if they are being “worked” or not (Matysik, 2009). In this way, Mazer shifts the evaluative criteria to a different plane than academic scholarship on wrestling had previously been focused on. This shift in fans’ evaluative criteria is representative of the various forms of play that audiences use when engaging and consuming media texts. These audiences want to suspend their disbelief, playing with the rehearsed spectacles before them while simultaneously reveling in their ability to be

fooled. These wrestling audiences are complicating the boundaries set up by audience studies, destabilizing the signifiers of consumption established by the four models of the media audience.

In addition to the evaluative criteria Mazer identifies, wrestling fans also use extra-textual information and narratives in their consumption of wrestling texts. Specifically, wrestling fans use backstage information about characters and wrestling promotions, behind-the-scenes maneuverings that exist outside of the diegetic world of professional wrestling but occasionally manifest themselves in subtle ways that only the knowledgeable consumer would be aware of. The journalistic work of writers such as Dave Meltzer, who writes the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* since 1982, and Bryan Alvarez, who writes the *Figure Four Weekly Newsletter* since 1995, provides information to subscribers about the business of wrestling (and Mixed-Martial Arts) promotions. These newsletters inform the educated wrestling fan, as well as performers within the industry, about the world of professional wrestling, often featuring information that becomes fodder for debate and online discourse. Meltzer in particular serves as a critic, offering his perspective on how developments within the industry will impact companies going forward, providing historical context to wrestling texts, and giving aesthetic evaluations of wrestling matches. In this way Meltzer, as well as critics/journalists such as Alvarez, function as Gramsci's (2000) version of "organic intellectuals" who contextualize and theorize the wrestling landscape for wrestling fans and performers. Providing a voice to those who are less able to articulate their perspectives, either because they are risking employment opportunities if they comment truthfully (wrestlers) or because they lack access to various sources and histories (fans), these organic intellectuals provide commentary that contextualizes the genre of professional wrestling, crafting an historiography of the industry. They exist simultaneously within and outside the wrestling industry, commenting on its events and processes as journalists

who are preserving and recording history. This focus on the wrestling industry provides audiences with information about how wrestling “really” works, and many fans use this information when consuming and evaluating wrestling texts.

In addition, writers such as Alvarez and Meltzer evaluate each match, ascribing a rating based on its aesthetic qualities and historical significance. Ranging from zero to five stars, the star rating system is the accepted yardstick amongst members of the Internet Wrestling Community (IWC) for evaluating particular wrestling matches. As we shall see, extensive debates often develop over differences in star ratings, as fans often argue why a particular match is worthy of five stars instead of four and three-quarter stars, for example. These debates are one of the legacies of publications such as the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, as fans of professional wrestling have evolved greatly from their carnival roots.

Wrestling fans are often categorized, and categorize themselves, as “marks, smarts, or smarks”(Toepfer, 2006). The term mark refers to “wrestling lingo for a fan, especially one who believes wrestling is real...Originally a carnival term for gullible audience members or gamblers who could be easily defrauded, a mark is just a sucker to be exploited”(Randazzo V, 2008, p. 13). A mark is the hypothetical audience member who is unaware that professional wrestling is not, in fact, “real.” Critics of the wrestling genre often assume that the audience of wrestling fans is full of these marks, people unable to discern reality from fiction due to their low socioeconomic class and education levels. These marks are the proverbial embodiment of the vulnerable audience, so fragile and unsophisticated that they cannot determine if media texts are part of the real world or not. Smarts, on the other hand, are people that have inside information on the inner-workings of the wrestling industry (<http://www.pwtorch.com/insiderglossary.shtml>). Smarts are fully aware that wrestling is scripted, that the matches are not actual athletic

competitions where the “best” athlete wins. However, these theoretical smarts are presumably so “smart” that they are unable to actually enjoy wrestling, functioning as a sort of critic that is uninterested in the actual performance.

In order to clarify this distinction between marks and smarts we shall look at how a mark and a smart fan would look at the WWE character of Triple H, a polarizing figure within the fan community of professional wrestling due to his marriage to Stephanie McMahon, the daughter of WWE owner Vince McMahon and the head of WWE’s creative team. Triple H is often featured in the top matches on WWE events, and has been for over ten years. A mark would claim that Triple H competes in the main events because he is the best wrestler in the company, citing his many victories over other wrestlers as proof of his superiority. A mark would also potentially point out Triple H’s impressive physique and array of wrestling maneuvers, noting that Triple H is simply stronger and better than the competition. A smart, on the other hand, would argue that Triple H is a top wrestler in WWE because his character generates the largest profit margin for the company, citing successful events he has headlined in the past. A smart would also argue that Triple H’s backstage position of power in the company is the primary reason he is a featured performer in the company, noting his relationship with management. Each conception of the wrestling fan uses different evaluative criteria in this example. The wrestling mark is a vulnerable nincompoop, while the wrestling smart fan is too smart for his own good, not able to actually enjoy or take pleasure in the text. These two theoretical poles must be synthesized in order to accurately grasp what wrestling audiences do with wrestling texts.

The wrestling “smark” is the amalgamation of the mark and smart fan. Marion Wrenn (2004) claims that, “the term was apparently coined by the industry itself to name the contradiction of being a smart fan who nonetheless relishes the game, someone awed by and

engaged in viewing professional wrestling despite being expert in its construction”(p. 100).

Smarks are able to engage wrestling texts from the vantage point of both the mark and smart fan, fully aware that what they are witnessing is a staged wrestling match while simultaneously losing themselves in the moment, appreciating the aesthetics of the match and its context. Smarks willingly suspend their disbelief, “marking out” when a match is performed exceptionally well by the performers so that they are not constantly reminded of the artificial nature of the staged contest. The match is then evaluated by smarks using the evaluative criteria set forth by luminaries like Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez, as smarks ascribe their own star ratings to individual matches and then debate with other smarks about the merits of particular performers. In addition, smarks are fully aware of the extra-textual narratives that are part of wrestling, knowing about the backstage politics and maneuverings of the wrestling industry and its performers. These narratives become components of the evaluative criteria of smarks, as they incorporate these factors into their assessment of wrestling matches and texts. These smarks look at how well a character plays his or her role, evaluating their performance not only on the level of morality play but also along the aesthetic level of fully embodying their character and executing wrestling matches in a manner that facilitates the suspension of disbelief necessary in the genre. This means that smarks will often not behave as the diegetic narrative instructs them to, cheering for heels because they play their villainous role to perfection rather than jeering them because they are cowards or evil. Furthermore, smarks will also occasionally get into character themselves, knowing that they are part of wrestling’s “liveness” and willfully taking part in the spectacle by booing the villains even if they are fans of these characters when debating the merits of the performer within the IWC. In this way, smarks are the synthesis of not only marks and smarts, but of various conceptions of the media audience. They play roles, use a

variety of evaluative criteria when making aesthetic judgments, and offer examples of the passive, active, creative, and convergent audience simultaneously. These syntheses serve as tremendous analytic opportunities for media studies, as the model of wrestling fans morphs from the most presumed pathetic, uneducated media audience to one of its most playful and critically engaged case studies.

Furthermore, the notion of the smark as the full dialectical synthesis between the mark and the smart is useful when reevaluating Matt Hills' notion of the "scholar-fan and fan-scholar." For Hills, it is important to maintain the distinction between these two categories, that they may resemble each other but they could never fully be reconciled. The scholar-fan would always be a scholar first, even if he exhibits "fannish" tendencies. And by extension, the fan-scholar would always be just a fan, not fully crossing over to the more critical, educated side of the true scholar, even if their bodies of knowledge were very similar. The smark, on the other hand, is simultaneously the mark and the smart, never privileging one over the other. The smark is always aware of wrestling's constructed nature and behind-the-scenes practices, as well as able to enjoy wrestling texts and appreciate their aesthetic quality. These sorts of full reconciliations, where audiences are able to play with the multiple parts of their identity and privilege them all at the same time is a model of media consumption that gets us much closer to the aesthetic joy one takes from a media text as well as the critical eye that one uses to evaluate a given media text. Media audiences constantly play with their identities as fans and consumers, as they are not just fans of a given text. For example, a wrestling fan may also be a fan of films such as *The Princess Bride*, comics such as *The Boys*, television programs such as *Lost*, and so on. Fans are media subjects, playing with their multiple media identities as they form their total identity. From this perspective, rather than the Hillsian notion of fan-scholars and scholar-fans, the media

audience, which includes both fans and scholars, could more accurately be described as “schans” and “folars,” fully reconciling the seemingly impermeable boundaries that distinguish between these two groups of disparate cultural capital.

Recent explorations of the wrestling industry have also suggested how fluid the very nature of marks, smarts, and smarks is in the contemporary media landscape. Borrowing once again from Henry Jenkins’ (2006) *Convergence Culture*, we are apparently at a point where the distinctions between these terms are converging, particularly within the realm of media producers and consumers. Matthew Randazzo V (2008) explores the tragedy of professional wrestler Chris Benoit killing his family and himself in 2007, claiming that the brain injuries suffered by Benoit during his wrestling career led to the horrific crimes he committed. Randazzo claims that Benoit, a decorated wrestler and favorite of the IWC before his crimes, was a “mark” for professional wrestling despite being a performer. A category previously used to describe wrestling fans who were easy targets to convince what they were seeing was real, Randazzo claims that the real mark is a wrestler like Benoit who abuses his body for the fans in order to make the match look real when it is, in fact, “fake.” From this position, Benoit became a “mark” for himself, damaging his body and his brain through repeated concussions in order to respect the wrestling industry and perform in a manner to make his matches look like legitimate competitions. This focus on the quality of his matches is what made Benoit a favorite of the IWC before his death, and it is simultaneously what Randazzo claims led to the 2007 crimes. This horrific example demonstrates the fluid nature of professional wrestling, where even the performers are fluctuating between the various categories of mark, smart, and smark. Although Benoit was a wrestler trying to convince the fans to lose themselves in the matches and suspend their disbelief, ultimately it was Benoit who lost sight of the fact that professional wrestling is

not real. As we shall see, it is examples like this that make the genre such an important entry point into more nuanced conceptions of the media audience.

The inversion of the mark-smart relationship described by Randazzo demonstrates the power of these hermeneutic categories. Rather than simply being terms that wrestling fans and performers have historically used to describe various entities within the wrestling industry, these categories have mutable applications that Randazzo is able to illuminate with the Benoit example. Benoit's being both a mark (sacrificing his body and life for the wrestling industry) as well as a smart (performing staged matches for a monetary fee) demonstrates that these categories are not static. Instead, marks and smarts are identities that those within the industry perform in certain contexts. Benoit was a fan of professional wrestling (mark) who became a success in the industry (smart) and perfected his craft (smart) due to his own respect for the wrestling industry (mark). This vacillation between mark and smart is a cautionary tale in the Benoit example, as the tragedy of his murder/suicide resonates with wrestling fans in a number of contexts. However, Randazzo's hermeneutic categories help explain the Benoit tragedy. The language of wrestling fandom has applicability outside of media consumption, expanding to the very performance of wrestling texts, the fluid nature of identity, and the potential framework for understanding and contextualizing a terrible tragedy that dominated headlines in 2007.

The binary opposite of the Benoit example features wrestling fans willingly playing the role of the mark when the situation warrants it rather than being the dupe that is fooled by the wrestling performance. Fans of professional wrestling willingly perform certain roles within certain contexts. For example, smart fans often "mark out" over particular wrestling matches or performances. As we shall see, companies such as Ring of Honor (ROH) encourage these fans to momentarily suspend their disbelief in the staged match and willingly play the role of the

mark in the audience, cheering for the false finishes of the match and jeering the villains (heels) while supporting the heroes (babyfaces). This is a willing assumption of the identity of the mark, as these fans mark out for the performance. In this way, the fans are performing as well, orchestrating a complex symphony of practitioners and spectators, marks and smarts in the same moment and space. Rather than marks and smarts, these willful performances could be described as the true amalgamation of identities – smarks one and all. Instead of playing static roles and duping the easy marks, the smark is simultaneously heel and babyface, fan and performer, mark and smart in the same moment. Put succinctly, the smark is play, or rather playing with all of these identities within the space of professional wrestling. And it is this play that necessitates the concepts of game studies be incorporated into these consumption processes.

This assumption of various roles during the consumption of wrestling texts can be extrapolated to culture at large. When one cries at the movies even though it is obvious the representations on the two-dimensional screen are not real, this is a process that mirrors the wrestling smark who willfully suspends disbelief to enjoy the wrestling text. Actors who prepare for a role by embodying the nuances of their character could also be described as exhibiting smarkish tendencies, as they are simultaneously an actor and a character. This broader applicability of the smark in professional wrestling serves as an excellent example of Simon Frith's (1992) and Thomas McLaughlin's (1996) notion of "vernacular theory," which describes two seemingly disparate voices (fans and academics) coming together with equal validity. The categories employed by wrestling fans provide a useful framework for understanding cultural processes outside of professional wrestling. The wrestling smark, who embodies the dialectical synthesis of play, can be used as an hermeneutic category for understanding consumption processes of media audiences. Similar to how camp was comprehended in the 1950s, wrestling

marks can illuminate complex consumption processes of media audiences and provide a model for understanding these confounding behaviors.

Game Studies

As mentioned in the previous section, professional wrestling is an excellent example of the need for a theory of play when conceptualizing media audiences, as the genre features conventions that require audiences to constantly question the legitimacy of what they see, despite their knowledge of the artifice of all wrestling matches. Professional wrestling at its very core features facets of play, as its performers portray themselves as characters that pretend to fight each other while simultaneously protecting each other's wellbeing. Similarly, the gestures and signifying processes of professional wrestling feature utterances of excess, ensuring that its exaggerated actions resonate with fans who are present. Fans willingly suspend their disbelief and mark out, either for the aesthetic qualities of the performance or the pure joy of playing a role in the spectacle. These fans of professional wrestling play with both the narratives that are presented within the texts themselves, as well as with the extra-diegetic narratives that are circulated by wrestling journalists such as Meltzer and Alvarez. These extra-diegetic narratives also serve as hierarchical subcultural capital, as fans can play certain roles within the subculture of professional wrestling fandom by showing off their literacy with wrestling history, texts, and aesthetic taste. The genre of professional wrestling for many fans is, in fact, fun. It interpellates its audience as playful subjects, requiring a horizon of expectations that is genre specific but simultaneously vast. The complex nature of this genre necessitates the exploration of a body of literature that seems to exist peripherally to cultural studies and audience studies – game studies.

Game studies provides us with the vocabulary and conception of media consumption that is able to reconcile the differences between various models of media audiences, as well as between seemingly disparate academic disciplines. However, the field has since moved away from theories of play and privileged the properties of games, losing sight of the crucial concept of play.

Theories of play and games owe much to Johan Huizinga (1955) and his influential *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga attempts to demarcate a theory of play, arguing that it is a natural process that extends beyond human culture to the realm of animals. In terms of human play, Huizinga offers the following characteristics of play – that all play is voluntary, it is distinct from “real” life, it is distinct in terms of locality and duration, and it features rules or order.

“Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means”(Huizinga, 1955, p. 13).

This classification of play provides us a starting point, a set of principles or characteristics to gauge the activity known as play. This foundation demands that play processes be taken seriously, requiring boundaries be demarcated in order to understand exactly what constitutes play. However, professional wrestling complicates Huizinga’s definition of play to an extent, and as we shall see Huizinga’s notion of play necessitates a more inclusive definition since many of its features are complicated in the contemporary media landscape.

First of all, Huizinga claims that all play is voluntary. By voluntary, Huizinga means that we enter into the field of play freely, and that we enjoy it or otherwise we would cease to play. Similarly, we cannot be forced to play, as once forced into something it becomes an activity that

is not play. This concept is crucial to Huizinga's definition because it constitutes the activity of play as "fun" or enjoyable while simultaneously accounting for the agency of the "player" that early generations of audience studies research denied media audiences by conceptualizing them as passive entities. However, the problem with this notion is that very often people engage in activities they may not want to do. For example, one can play a game because it is mandated by friends or family, or out of commitment to a team. If we extend our notion of play to all media consumption, then many times we are inundated with media images, often without our consent. To be exposed to these images is not voluntary, but we consume them in playful ways, as this analysis shall demonstrate.

Secondly, Huizinga argues that play is separate from real life, that it is an imaginary process that lacks the consequences and weight of our real existence. According to Huizinga, we voluntarily enter what he calls the "magic circle" that marks gamespace as distinct from our real existence. Our everyday experiences are, for Huizinga, outside of this magic circle, creating a boundary that is an integral aspect of Huizinga's definition of play. This distinction is also of paramount importance for this project in delineating mediated experiences as distinct from interpersonal experiences. I argue that all mediated experiences require the consumer to voluntarily enter this magic circle where they can subsequently play with media content, and Huizinga's early work on the concept of the magic circle is crucial. In addition, this notion of the magic circle is complicated by the distinction between play and game, as we shall see shortly. Implicit in Huizinga's identification of the magic circle is the presumption that the activity of play is not as important as our real existence. The idea that play is inconsequential is problematic because we are now constructing a hierarchy of activities, and as media scholars we are well aware of the consequences of assigning a certain status to some forms of communication

over others. Play, in many ways, is just as important as real life, as scholars such as Castranova (2007) and Wark (2007) will demonstrate shortly. Further, play is a component of media consumption and with the ubiquitous state of media in contemporary culture we must treat these mediated experiences as integral to real experiences. To suggest that our time spent consuming media texts is not part of our daily lives, especially given the amount of time we currently spend consuming media, is to deride our culture as being obsessed with things that do not matter. Obviously, media matters a great deal to contemporary culture and these mediated experiences must not be treated as hierarchically inferior.

Huizinga also claims that play is distinct in terms of time and space, meaning that we know when we are playing and when we are not, as well as what spaces constitute arenas of play and which do not. This third feature of play clarifies the space of the aforementioned magic circle. For play to exist, there have to be moments of non-play, where some one is actively outside of the magic circle. Once again, this notion of the magic circle is crucial to understanding the features of play and media consumption. The duration of a film, the time spent playing a video game, the act of reading a book, and all other mediated experiences posit a distinct temporal and spatial act on the part of the consumer. According to Huizinga, when one steps outside of the magic circle or stops playing (or for our purposes stops consuming media) the play has stopped. To counter this claim, media consumption as an arena of play is, as stated previously, omnipresent in our contemporary lives. Further, many fans of media texts continue to construct identities for themselves when they are not in the process of consuming the text, further complicating the notion that play is distinct in time and space. For example, I know many of my students are thinking of media forms when they are in class listening to lectures, and

to suggest they are not thinking about consumption unless they are consuming is highly inaccurate.

Finally, Huizinga argues that play is bound by the rules of a game, as once these rules are broken then the play stops and chaos ensues. Huizinga's final point provides the basis of a definition of games, focusing on the rules of the game and how games are dependent on these rules being followed. At this stage Huizinga is using games to define play, demonstrating the slippage between these two terms that has haunted game studies throughout its history.

Huizinga's introduction of games and rules provides a crucial jumping off point for game studies, exploring the systems that limit and structure the processes of play. This distinction of play is also the most problematic, as it highlights the glaring weakness in game studies – namely the focus on games over play. Games are a source of limitation, an ideological constraint on the free-form nature of play. Games serve as case studies of ideology, of the limits that are imposed on players. This focus on games is extraordinarily important as it exposes the ideological and hegemonic nature of encoded messages, but it is certainly not the liberatory process many champion. Instead, this analysis suggests that play offers the potential of possibility, of using the subjective imagination of the media consumer to read the polysemic text. However, games are distinct from this process as they are always bound by rules, and it is this slippage that game studies has centered on over the actual notion of play.

Roger Callois (1958) expands upon the definition of play that Huizinga offers in his influential *Man, Play, and Games*. Callois takes Huizinga to task for being both too broad and too narrow in his definition of play, arguing that Huizinga omits certain games that are crucial forms of play, as well as certain criteria of play that are part of play's core principles. Callois supports Huizinga's four characteristics of play outlined (and challenged) above, labeling these

four components of play as: Free, Make-Believe, Separate, and Governed by Rules. While changing the titles or names of his classifications, they match up quite nicely to Huizinga's criteria. However, Callois adds two very important aspects to play that Huizinga leaves out – that play is both “Uncertain” and “Unproductive.” By play being uncertain Callois leaves room for both the result of the play to be uncertain, as well as the imagination of the individual player. This notion is key because it takes into account the subjective nature of play, that different individuals will play differently. Furthermore, this notion of uncertainty allows for Callois to include games of chance, something that he greatly criticized Huizinga for leaving out of his analysis.

Secondly, Callois claims that play is unproductive, meaning that play creates nothing tangible as a result. Specifically, Callois claims that,

“a characteristic of play, in fact, is that it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art. At the end of the game, all can and must start over again at the same point. Nothing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued. Play is an occasion of pure waste...”(1958, p. 5).

This focus on waste, on being unproductive, acknowledges the Protestant work ethic of working to create something and being compensated for that labor. Callois uses play here from the perspective of a Situationist, valorizing the challenge that play poses to this ideology. The frivolity of play is derided within a capitalist ideology in favor of doing something productive. This notion of not being productive or behaving inappropriately eerily mirrors the discourses Jenson (1991) highlights in her examination of fan practices, linking this sort of denigration of certain consumption processes. Both are seen as inappropriate, unproductive uses of one's time and energy. However, this analysis posits that play is a crucial component of media consumption, illuminating its importance in identity formation and subcultural capital.

Furthermore, this focus on play illuminates the ideological processes that seek to discourage its manifestations, privileging more hegemonic readings from a passive audience instead of encouraging more resistance from a playful audience. Within this discourse another binary has developed – one between being productive and unproductive. This either/or dichotomy mirrors earlier binaries identified in the fields of audience studies and professional wrestling, including fan-scholar/scholar-fan, mark/smart, and passive/active. Callois' focus on the unproductive nature of play once again points to the unstable nature of the signifiers within play in relation to games. The nature of play may be unproductive, but it could also produce a variety of goods or personal experiences that factor into the identity of the player. This reliance on play's unproductive nature illuminates the tendency within the field of game studies to limit the possibilities of play, to label it as something specific rather than recognize its fluid nature.

Clifford Geertz (1973) focuses on the conception of “deep play” in his essay, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” Geertz provides a new take on play by focusing on its ritualistic role in Balinese culture. Rather than deemphasizing play as separate from everyday life, Geertz focuses on the importance of play within his anthropological study of the Balinese when they voluntarily enter the magic circle. Geertz contends that the cockfights he observes become “deep” for the Balinese because they have something on the line in these matches. The things on the line come from outside of the magic circle, from parts of the everyday lives of the Balinese. Geertz contends that it isn't as simple as money, as for the Balinese there are more important identities at play within the space of the cockfight. For example, Geertz contends that certain villages and families are very much tied to their cock, that their very identity and masculinity is on the line, making the cockfight significantly deeper than a monetary investment would, even though money is often allegorically substituted for these deeper identity structures.

This anthropological study indicates that the cockfight is an arena of not only animals battling to the death and gambling, but of asserting one's very identity within the society, making the spectacle of paramount importance to the Balinese. Geertz takes play seriously rather than being an act of frivolity, exploring how identity formation is embedded within these play rituals. In this way, play is indeed distinct, as it was for Huizinga and Callois, but it is also "deep."

Paralleling Geertz' notion of deep play is Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's (2004) concept of "meaningful play" in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Salen and Zimmerman attempt to create a critical discourse for game design, setting the parameters of the field of game studies by producing a comprehensive work that focuses on all aspects of game design. The authors claim that meaningful play is the goal of all game design, that designers must employ an iterative design, meaning that designers must also become players of the games they create to ensure that the play is engaging to the potential gamer. Salen and Zimmerman state that, "Iterative design is a play-based design process. Emphasizing playtesting and prototyping, iterative design is a method in which design decisions are made based on the experience of playing a game while it is in development"(2004, p. 11). This convergence of producer and consumer announces that the notion of play is a crucial component of media production, that creators of the games must test their games by assuming the role of creator and player simultaneously. Rather than exist as a creator-player or player-creator, these media producers are always "creayers" or "plators," the embodiment of the dialectical smark in the field of game studies. And meaningful play can be generated by a game when there is "a relationship between player action and system outcome," as well as when the "relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernable and integrated into the larger

context of the game”(Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 37). This meaningful play keeps the player coming back, ensuring that the play is a crucial component of the gamer’s identity.

Game designer and theorist Raph Koster (2005), in *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, expands on this notion of meaningful play by arguing that games must be fun for us to continue to play them. Koster, in attempting to clarify what constitutes fun, focuses on the distinction between “flavor” and “mechanic” within a game. For Koster, the game’s mechanic is what makes the game fun, as it must be designed to encourage meaningful play, just challenging enough for the player while still offering the player an opportunity to experience the world of the game within the safe confines of the game’s space. However, for Koster the game’s flavor is superfluous, it is the game’s fiction that is merely added to the mechanic of the game to titillate the senses. For example, Koster presents a fictitious game where the mechanic is to prevent objects from accumulating and reaching the top of the screen. The flavor of this example is a pit where you prevent captives from climbing over each other to make their escape, including using the carcasses of their loved ones as means to this end. This flavor makes the game less than enticing (arguably), but Koster argues that the flavor is an added feature, the mechanic is what makes the game fun. And at its core, the mechanic of Koster’s example is *Tetris*. The human beings mirror the geographic shapes of *Tetris*’ diegesis, and the goal is to prevent the shapes from stacking up and reaching the top. This exact process happens in the game described above, except it has an added narrative, or flavor, attached that is less palatable. By focusing on the game’s flavor, we can lose sight of its mechanic. My analysis posits that games are often fun when we can play with both flavor and mechanic. Both flavor and mechanic are simultaneously restrictive and imaginative. The flavor or narrative of the game allows for the imagination of the player to run wild while simultaneously grounding the experience of the game with specific

images/narratives. The mechanic is also structuring the experience of the game in an ideological fashion while also remaining interpretive enough that players can add their own subjective flavor to the experience.

Further, this dialectical process converges yet another binary in the field between flavor and mechanic. This dichotomy is embodied in the field of game studies between two separate camps – ludologists and narratologists. Ludologists focus on the mechanics of games and gameplay, exploring the structures that constitute games. Narratologists focus on the flavor of games, privileging the narrative or story that is attached to a game's mechanic. As game studies has increasingly focused on digital games, ludology has taken prominence within the burgeoning field to mark it as distinct from other media studies/programs. However, Gonzalo Frasca (2003) argues that what is required in the field of game studies is a convergence between ludologists and narratologists, mirroring the convergence of several other aforementioned dichotomous relationships. According to Frasca, both perspectives offer positive insights on the field of game studies, and it would be to the detriment of the field to ignore one in favor of the other. Rather than be either a ludologist or narratologist, Frasca urges scholars to be both ludologist and narratologist.

Another focus of game studies analyzes what the prevalence of video games and gaming culture will have for society. In other words, what impact will games have on our lives, and how will our lives change because of their growing status in our society? Edward Castronova (2007), in *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun is Changing Reality*, argues that the emergence of video games will result in a generation of society that demands their real-world lives mirror their virtual ones. He claims that we will require our lives to be more fun due to how much time we spend having fun playing games online or via video game systems. This idyllic view of our

future is obviously based off grand suppositions, but the enticing aspect of this argument is that playing is more a part of our lives than ever before. My own analysis contends that play has always been a part of our mediated lives, it is only that now with the omnipresence of video games in our culture that we are more aware of our playful nature, particularly as we become used to not regarding playful processes as wasting time. Furthermore, this analysis posits that we can apply the notions of play from game studies to media consumption processes, illuminating the practices of media audiences that have been present all along.

On the opposite side of Castronova is McKenzie Wark's (2007) *Gamer Theory*. Wark argues that rather than creating a more "fun" world, games are instead facilitating the spread of what he calls the "military industrial entertainment complex," the dominant ideology that limits our range of choices and teaches us to expect rewards and tangible outcomes for our actions. Wark recalls the language of Marxism to demonstrate that gamespace demands an "exchange value" for our actions. Within Marxist thought, the exchange value is distinct from "use-value," or what an object or action's use is to society or the consumer. Exchange value refers to actual capital or money an action or object will command on the market. Rather than enjoying the pleasure of play, we are conditioned by games to expect a reward when we accomplish something, and that we should always be looking to the next potential accomplishment. In this way, the ideology of capitalism is reinforced via gamespace, as we demand all of our actions have rewards or exchange value. These rewards become fetishized, mirroring Adorno's (1991) notion that culture itself becomes a commodity tainted by "commodity fetishism"(p. 34). Games, for Wark, structurally discourage actual play, limiting our range of choices by enforcing finite limits on what is possible within gamespace and conditioning us to want to learn the rules so that we can master the game rather than circumventing or disregarding the rules entirely. In

fact, games teach the player that there are rules in all facets of life inside of gamespace, and as games become more of a part of our everyday lives we lose sight of the distinction between what is and is not gamespace.

Wark's analysis of gamespace represents a critique of hegemony and the power of the media audience, as this entity is interpellated as a subject that is under the rule of gamespace, conditioned to the dominant ideology so concretely that he or she believes that there is no ideology or rules present. Games don't offer liberatory possibilities or a forum for cultural debate. Instead, they mask their ideological processes and situate the player in a rule-based system that limits the processes of play. In fact, many current computer games expertly camouflage their rules, making the possibilities appear endless when, in fact, they are still very structured. The rules become assumed, so very natural that one cannot playfully navigate to a realm where they do not exist. Furthermore, expressions of pure play become discouraged by gamespace, as the game is not "fun" enough because there is nothing to win or strive for. In this paradigm, meaningful play cannot take place unless one is able to shed the rules of the game. Simultaneously, rules can also be generative. Knowing the rules can help the players/audiences by providing evaluative criteria to assess the processes of play. Wrestling audiences, for example, evaluate wrestling texts and exhibit certain behaviors based on the established rules of the genre. These two conceptions of the use of rules within play produce a dichotomy that players must traverse – which is precisely what play facilitates.

These two dichotomous positions on games and play produce yet another seemingly irreconcilable disconnect, a framework that positions games and those who play them as either fully in control of their lives (Castronova), demanding that it resemble more fun experiences within gamespaces, and one that positions games as ideological constructs (Wark) with those

who play them locked inside of dire hegemonic processes. As we shall see, this dichotomy is only irreconcilable in theory, as a new conception of play allows for audiences to navigate this terrain and simultaneously function as masters of gamespaces and subjects of those very same gamespaces. More accurately, audiences are able to play with both of these identities, using these experiences as portions of an overall media subject.

The Importance of Play as a Convergent Process

There is considerable debate and consternation over how to define something as ambiguous as play. As we have seen, theorists who attempt to define play (Huizinga and Callois, for example) are often trying to identify what play is by pointing out what is not part of play. However, this analysis posits that this perspective is inherently flawed, as play is an inclusive, rather than exclusive, process. Play allows for the bringing together of seemingly disparate dichotomous elements. The most accurate definition of play that can be offered is that play is a dialectical *process*. Play as process includes both the categories of play identified by theorists such as Callois and Huizinga, as well as accounts for the exceptions to their exclusive criteria identified in the previous section. Play is indeed voluntary, or free, but it is also something that happens involuntarily. We are often put in position to play with multiple identities, even when in situations that discourage play. For example, we often assume identities when put in social situations, including our roles as educators compared to our roles outside of academia. In this way, we are always scholars and fans, playing with these identities in different contexts. Rather than being defined as one or the other primarily, as Hills (2004) suggests, we are able to juggle these identities when certain situations warrant. When lecturing a college

class, I am primarily a scholar, but depending on class discussion I can alter this partial identity and bring forth my less “scholarly” attributes. And obviously this situation is reversible, as I can behave like a fan in certain situations outside of the university but am able to summon my scholarly persona when a certain situation or discussion warrants, sometimes simply when someone makes a grammatical mistake in my presence. These examples demonstrate how simultaneously voluntary and involuntary play is.

Huizinga and Callois also argue that play is distinct from real life and make-believe, respectively. I definitely think there is merit here in that play often takes place in a realm that is not part of our everyday experience, often linked to notions of “escape” in discourses surrounding media consumption. This is when play is the most visible, standing outside of our normal experiences. However, I would also suggest that play is indeed part of our lives as well, with consequences and experiences that help shape our total identities and make us who we are. These experiences, even if distinct from some portions of our real lives, certainly have meaning and impact to our real lives. In fact, play is the most radical when it doesn’t presume a time when we aren’t playing in some form. Instead, we could say there are degrees of play. We are always thinking, using representations to stand in for objects and people, communicating, and negotiating the multiple parts of our total identity. We can think of all of these processes as forms of play, conscious and subconscious processes that yield our subjective identities. The processes of play cannot be labeled as completely separate, as it is simultaneously separate and integral to our real identities and experiences.

Similarly, Callois and Huizinga argue that play is separate or distinct in locality and time. This notion is complicated by the fact that we can often play with parts of our identity even when we are not directly involved in the process. For example, many of the subjects interviewed for

this study claim that they often think about a particular game (*Champions of the Galaxy*) even when they are not playing it, imagining the characters giving interviews to build up upcoming matches. In this way, they are playing part of the game even when not directly involved with the cards and dice that are components of this text. We will explore this game in detail in chapter three of this analysis, but for now it is important simply because it indicates an example of play extending beyond the actual realm of gamespace. This example illustrates that the processes of play are complex and inclusive, making it difficult to mark play as a distinct time and place. It is only in its most visible manifestations that these distinctions remain static, as the processes of play are much more fluid in both time and space.

Huizinga and Callois claim that play is structured by rules, and as we have previously discussed this is more a function of a game than all play. Wark and Castronova provide us two opposite perspectives on games and their impact, but the similarity to these two seemingly opposed viewpoints is that play is involved in each. In this way, regardless of the outcome, there is still a process of play involved in the game. We can be limited by these rules, as Wark would argue, meaning we are ideologically conditioned to expect our lives to be limited and to simultaneously be productive creators within capitalism. Or we can use games to demand more from our lives, as Castronova would argue, using the process of play that we enjoy within gamespaces and applying similar processes to our daily routines. As we shall see, these possibilities are subjective, depending on the reading processes of individual gamers/consumers. However, it is significant to note that play is the dialectical process that allows for these potential outcomes, as we play with these gamespaces and their rules and make of them both utopian and dystopian futures.

Callois extends his definition of play to include the uncertainty and unproductive nature of play. These are concepts that are complicated by actual processes of play. Callois' claim that play is always uncertain (in order to include in his taxonomy games of chance) is true for many forms of play, but Koster (2005) focuses on the notion of "mastery" of certain games. The goal, for Koster, of all play is to master a certain process. In this way, we continue to play games until we master them, then they are no longer fun and we pursue the mastery of a new game. In this way, mastery is the antithesis of uncertainty, as we always strive to make the uncertain certain. And many gamers will continue to play the game long after they have mastered it, meaning the outcome is no longer uncertain. Koster's theory that all games feature the drive for mastery is complicated by role-playing-games (RPGs) such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, and as we shall see, *Champions of the Galaxy*. For these games, there is no system to master, it is more experiential than goal oriented. Instead, it is the process of play that is enjoyable for the player, not the end result.

If play is all of the things identified by Callois and Huizinga, and simultaneously not only these things, the question remains as to the utility of the term. I mentioned above that play is a process, but to clarify that statement it is more accurate to state that play is a process of dialectical convergence. Play allows one to bridge gaps that are theoretically irreconcilable. Seemingly disparate elements identified in these literatures are able to be examined as possible, as components of an integrated or dialectical whole. These dichotomous reconciliations include things like: play and game, real life and the magic circle, passive and active audiences, scholars and fans, hegemonic and polysemic texts, ludologists and narratologists, productive and unproductive, flavor and mechanic, player and creator, and marks and smarts. Play allows for a dialectical relationship to emerge, a process of complete convergence that highlights the process

itself. Rather than the end result, the focus of play mirrors Deleuze's (1994) aforementioned notion of becoming. Marks and smarts become smarks – simultaneously a mark and a smart with neither entity privileged over the other. If we examine media consumption through the lens of play, these dialectical combinations manifest themselves, mirroring Simon Frith's (1992) and Thomas McLaughlin's (1996) notion of “vernacular theory.” The hermeneutic categories of professional wrestling describe media consumption perfectly – a community of smarks that are both smarts and marks at the same time, privileging neither unless the situation warrants. Rather than privilege one over the other, the notion of play allows seemingly disparate elements to be examined in conjunction, converging the dichotomy between these elements. To conceptualize media audiences as playful subjects, juggling their various identities and willingly playing with content, even if it is often within the structured elements of Wark's gamespaces, allows the media critic a more comprehensive conception of what we pragmatically (Altman, 1999) do with media genres and content.

While the realm of developmental and child psychology has taken the phenomenon of play seriously, the result is that play has been ghettoized to the realm of children (Bailey, 1933; Bach, 1945; Bateson, 1955). As we have seen, various scholarly disciplines focusing on media consumption have attempted to account for how audiences are actually consuming media content, but the notion of play has remained tangential. This project brings the concept of play squarely within the realm of media audiences by focusing on mediated experiences as a form of the magic circle. When we consume media, we play with various partial identities, identifying with various characters and narratives, accepting the mediated images as a form that matters to us. We become “smarks” that “mark out” over media content, aware that these are actors (in a film or television show) on a two dimensional screen, or pictures on a page (in a book or comic).

But when we have entered the magic circle, it doesn't matter that it is play, because we lose ourselves in the media narratives. This conscious marking out recalls Judith Butler's (1993) notion of "performativity," a willful performance that yields marks for media content. The willful marking out of a media subject, the entering of the magic circle and recalling of partial components of one's total identity while consuming media texts, is performative in nature because it produces what it names. We become marks for media content, despite our existence as smarts prior to entering the magic circle.

The performative aspect of play allows for a step beyond Callois and Huizinga, as play can be looked at as a destabilization of signifying processes. The signifier and signified exhibits slippage as we are both marks and smarts simultaneously, despite the signified of each term seeming to cancel out the other. This is the dialectical process of play at work – bringing together seemingly contradictory aspects of a dichotomous relationship and converging them into an organic whole. In this way, play is consistent with Latour's (1993) notion of modernity setting up "fake binaries." Binaries such as fan and scholar, play and game, mark and smart come together via play to provide a more accurate account of media subjects, as well as media consumption. This project explores how wresting audiences are able to exhibit this dialectical behavior, bringing together seemingly disparate aspects of their identities.

Research Methodology

This project is a study of media audiences. However, these audiences do not exist in a vacuum. As Paul du Gay (1997) demonstrates in *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, audiences must be understood within the framework of the "circuit of culture." Du

Gay argues that cultural artifacts must be examined from five different and interrelated perspectives through which every cultural object passes. These five perspectives include production, regulation, identity, representation, and consumption. Du Gay describes production as both the economy and labor of creating the media object. Regulation refers to the legalities and political context that shape how the product is disseminated. Identity refers to how the text facilitates the formation of subjectivities. Representation is defined as the signifying practices of ideas and images as they represent the world. Finally, consumption refers to how media audiences integrate media into their lives. Du Gay contends that in order to comprehensively understand a media text one must examine every aspect of the circuit of culture equally, as too often fields such as film studies privilege areas of representation and identity at the expense of production, regulation, and consumption practices. Further, Du Gay argues that these nodes in the circuit are interrelated, meaning that each aspect of the circuit of culture impacts and shapes the others, necessitating the inclusion of all aspects of the circuit of culture in each analysis.

My focus on media audiences and their playful processes is consistent with du Gay's assertion that individual nodes in the circuit of culture cannot be looked at in isolation. Audiences are the focus, but in relation to the signifying processes of media texts and the machinations of the media industry that contextualizes and structures these texts. This analysis consolidates Du Gay's framework of the circuit of culture, examining certain nodes of the circuit in conjunction so as to give attention to the three main areas or regions. Specifically, this analysis combines aspects of production and regulation as components of the **industry**. The media industry is responsible for the production processes that yield media texts, as well as forming and influencing legislation that shapes how media will function in society. The processes of the industry are applied to insights they provide on media audience processes.

Secondly, the areas of representation and identity are combined and evaluated as parts of the media **text**. The text focuses on what we actually see in media texts, including its signifying processes and its various representations of the culture that creates and consumes the text. A focus on the actual text includes what is actually present, and implied, in the visual, tactile and aural spaces of the media form. The media text is examined in relation to how media audiences play with various textual iterations of professional wrestling. Finally, the node of consumption is examined as part of the media **audience**, focusing on the pragmatics of how media forms are actually consumed and interpreted by various media audiences. Each chapter in this study focuses on these three components of the media landscape – the industry, the text, and the audience, in order to garner the most comprehensive analysis of the practices of media audiences. In each chapter the concept of play is highlighted in order to demonstrate how these audience practices can only be fully understood within the framework of play.

Each chapter in this analysis also requires authorization from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) due to the focus on the practices of actual media audiences. Three protocols have been submitted and each protocol is designed to incorporate a different form of ethnography in order to provide the most comprehensive analysis of the audience for professional wrestling. This project's focus on the playful processes of media audiences requires an ethnographic methodology inspired by the field of anthropology in order to gauge the practices of actual media audiences. However, media ethnography is certainly a contested notion, as many scholars debate the "proper" way to perform an ethnography (for example, see Christine Hine's (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*). Rather than attempt to apply a single ethnographic perspective that may be inappropriate for every chapter of this project, my ethnographic methodology is inspired by S. Elizabeth Bird's (2003) "inclusive ethnographic method." Bird contends that ethnography is a

research methodology that is malleable to research questions and goals, as in one instance participant observation may be appropriate whereas in another study Bird uses a “researcher-absent” methodology, which means that Bird merely allowed her participants to freely discuss their interpretations of various “scandalous” news shows. She contends that her presence would have hindered the discussion of these texts, so instead she simply had the discussions recorded and studied the audio recordings of them later.

This inclusive ethnographic methodology is appropriate for an analysis of how wrestling fans play with mediated iterations of professional wrestling. Rather than assume a monolithic wrestling audience, the goal is to highlight various practices within this audience and illustrate how these practices can only be fully understood as a form of play. Wrestling fans are contradictory and complex, which makes any attempt to create a comprehensive taxonomy impossible. Instead, by employing various approaches to ethnography specific practices within these audiences are explored in each chapter. These practices must be taken as distinct case studies rather than presumptions of a final, conclusive audience that follows this genre. However, these practices may also be extrapolated to media audiences everywhere, as future research could demonstrate how the practices highlighted in this analysis are mirrored by fans of different media texts and genres.

Each chapter also includes an exploration of the industry that circulates and produces the particular iteration of professional wrestling examined. Secondly, each chapter also focuses on the text itself, providing the rules that structure the experience of the particular text for media audiences. This textual analysis is crucial because it sets up the ways that audiences may play with these texts. In addition, an autoethnography accompanies each chapter, as all potential limitations of my approach, as well as the biases that are part of my analysis, are presented.

Following the autoethnography are the details of my ethnography for each case study, as well as my interpretation of the data that is collected in each study. Each chapter concludes with an analysis of how play is the best way to understand the practices that were observed in each ethnographic case study in the overall project.

The first chapter serves as a participant observation of the performance of professional wrestling. The goal of this chapter was to observe the practices of wrestling audiences during the actual performance of wrestling texts, focusing on the forms of interaction that wrestling audiences exhibit during the performance. In addition, the goal of this chapter was to see how these practices differ depending on the specific iteration of wrestling. In order to perform this participant observation I attended the performance of a WWE event known as *WrestleMania* in Atlanta on Sunday April 3, 2011. This event was held at the Georgia Dome and is WWE's most famous event of the year, as wrestling fans from around the globe descend on Atlanta to take part in and witness the event.

In addition to the participant observation at *WrestleMania*, I conducted two additional participant observations to compare with the WWE event. Due to wrestling fans coming to Atlanta for WWE's big event, several independent wrestling companies were also running shows in Atlanta during the weekend to capitalize on the number of wrestling fans in the area. In particular, the wrestling company Ring of Honor (ROH) held shows at Center Stage in Atlanta on April 1, 2011 and April 2, 2011. I conducted participant observations at these two shows as well to see how distinct different iterations of professional wrestling are (WWE and ROH). I also examined the playful practices of these two groups of wrestling fans, paying special attention to how their practices differed depending on the company producing the professional

wrestling. This data is compared to the data collected at *WrestleMania* in order to provide a more comprehensive account of the various practices that wrestling audiences display.

Chapter two is also an ethnography of the practices of wrestling audiences, but rather than occurring at an actual location I used data collected from online discourses of wrestling fans. This chapter features no solicitation or interaction from my end. Instead, I simply collected data from a selection of online sources devoted to professional wrestling and its fans. By poring over this data, I was able to isolate key themes that dominate online discourses of this genre, as well as illuminate how the concept of play allows researchers to understand these online discourses more fully. I submitted an IRB protocol to use this unsolicited information, as these online posts were made separate from the goals of this research project. The websites used for this chapter include: rohrestling.com (the official website of Ring of Honor), wrestlecrap.com (a website devoted to and celebrating the more derided and frivolous moments in the genre's history), 411wrestling.com (a website that features a comment function where guests can post on news stories in professional wrestling), and f4wonline.com (a subscription website run by two of the most influential figures to cover the wrestling industry – Bryan Alvarez and Dave Meltzer). These websites were selected based on their tremendous amount of fan participation and numerous posts on a variety of topics related to wrestling, as well as to provide variety to the notion of a wrestling audience. By approaching the subject from so many different angles and groups of fans, the discourses that transcend each of these websites can be seen as themes that the IWC (Internet Wrestling Community) focuses on.

Chapter three features a combination of the ethnographic practices in the previous two chapters. The focus of the chapter is on the fan community of a card-and-dice game entitled *Champions of the Galaxy*, which features professional wrestling taking place on a cosmic scale

set one hundred years in the future. In order to explore the playful practices of this tight-knit fan community, I used a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and the collection and analysis of online posts made by members of this community. This project is also IRB approved and has taken place over several years, starting in 2006. In July of 2006 I went to an event entitled Galacticon, a gaming convention in Jamestown, New York for fans of *Champions of the Galaxy*. At this event I attempted to gather support and participants for my future research project on the game, and was met with silence and disinterest. While there I won a lottery drawing to have a character of my design made into a character in the game, and over the years this character has allowed me access to this close-knit community. I also took part in online discourses on the game's website over the years, many times playing the role of the character I created, and this facilitated my acceptance into this group. In July of 2009 I returned to Jamestown for the 2009 version of Galacticon, and had much more success in gathering interest for this project.

While at Galacticon in 2009 I passed out a questionnaire designed to get these gamers thinking about how they play the game, as well as what they like about both wrestling and their particular community. This questionnaire was also distributed to several members of the community not at Galacticon by making a post on the company message board and sending the information via the mail to respondents' addresses. These respondents mailed the questionnaire and consent form back to me, granting me permission to conduct in-depth interviews over the phone about how they play the game, whether there is a correct way to play the game, their feelings on the community fostered by Filsinger Games, and on the genre of wrestling in general. These interviews were designed to take about thirty minutes of time, and the information obtained in them was kept anonymous in the project. The goal was to highlight the various

processes of play exhibited by this fan community, as well as the tensions that erupt within this community on the ability to deviate from the rules of the game.

Each of these chapters uses ethnography in various forms in order to highlight the practices of wrestling audiences. Rather than employ a single version or iteration of ethnography, this inclusive methodology exposes how complex and intricate the audience of this genre is. Indeed, each case study necessitates a new ethnographic methodology in order to reach the selected portion of the wrestling audience being examined. These audiences play with the genre of wrestling in various ways, and these processes become visible with an inclusive ethnographic methodology. Rather than adhering to a strict notion of what ethnography is and how to best conduct ethnography, the complexities of this media audience are reflected in the methodology.

Chapter Outline

This analysis posits a new framework for examining the playful processes of media audiences. Previous conceptions of media audiences conceptualize audiences in binary categories, forcing either/or dichotomies to somehow encapsulate what audiences do with the media they encounter. This project asserts that the concept of play, a theme that permeates the field of game studies, allows for a way out of these binary categories. The playful processes of media audiences centers on the processes themselves, focusing on the possibilities of audience liberation while simultaneously accounting for the ideological structures that limit these playful practices. Each chapter in this analysis focuses on these playful practices of media audiences,

highlighting how play allows for media audiences to both structure and be structured by media texts.

Chapter one of this analysis explores the various audiences of the professional wrestling genre and how these audiences play a part in the staging of wrestling texts. Employing an inclusive ethnographic methodology, this chapter focuses on the performance of wrestling texts from April 1 through April 3, 2011, totaling three wrestling shows in all. During this weekend WWE featured its annual *WrestleMania* event in Atlanta, Georgia at the Georgia Dome. Wrestling fans from around the world came to Atlanta to witness the event, and I observed the event and its fans in person. In addition, smaller independent wrestling companies such as Ring of Honor followed WWE into Atlanta to capitalize on the amount of wrestling fans in the city over the weekend. Ring of Honor held two events over the weekend as well, and I conducted a participant observation of these two events and compared them to the WWE event.

The ethnographies conducted in this chapter illuminate the practices of wrestling audiences at these three wrestling events. Focusing on how wrestling fans play certain roles while at the shows, these participant observations demonstrate how looking at wrestling audiences in either/or dichotomies is insufficient for understanding how their behaviors impact the wrestling performances. Indeed, the playful practices of these audiences illustrates that these audience members are part of the performance itself as they play along with certain roles prescribed to them by the textual producers (in this case the wrestling companies who are staging the events) while simultaneously engaging these texts on a critical level. These audiences embody the concept of the smark described earlier, as they simultaneously are both marks and smart fans. The process of becoming the smark is what this participant observation illustrates, as these fans are able to recall the portions of their identity that is mark or smart depending on the

context, rather than exist as a fully synthesized whole that is fundamentally distinct from either mark or smart. Instead, these fans will be both mark and smart.

Chapter two of this project explores wrestling audiences and their playful processes as they manifest themselves in the Internet Wrestling Community (IWC). Rather than observe these audiences in a specific location like in chapter one, this chapter focuses on the online identities of wrestling fans as they congregate in various online realms and discuss/debate the wrestling genre. The data collected in this chapter was not solicited, as I used online posts made by members of the IWC as members of this community discursively construct the aesthetic paradigms they use to engage wrestling texts. Focusing on four websites that feature extensive and vociferous online activity from the IWC, this chapter demonstrates how wrestling audiences play with the wrestling genre while simultaneously using their aesthetic paradigm to make evaluative claims and value judgments about wrestling and their own fandom. Debates over what determines success and value (money or aesthetics), what is the correct mode of address for a wrestling company (aiming at mass or niche audiences) and what features of a wrestling organization should be privileged (spectacle or minimalist) serve as the three main themes that permeate all four online websites explored in this chapter.

The focus on money and aesthetics as the source of the aesthetic paradigms of wrestling fans is framed within a debate over mainstream and independent success in professional wrestling. In particular, the practices of WWE and ROH structure much of the debate within the IWC concerning how the fan community is considered, how much subcultural capital is awarded, and how to define success for performers/companies/fans of wrestling. By looking at these debates within the IWC, fissures within the community emerge. The only way to reconcile

these gaps is through the concept of play, and in particular the role of fantasy booking within the IWC.

Chapter three of this analysis focuses on the dialectics of play by reconciling some of the disparities presented in this study and exploring the process of play within the margins of professional wrestling. In particular, the fan community of a card game entitled *Champions of the Galaxy* is the focus of chapter three. This game is based on professional wrestling and set one hundred years in the future. The text of *Champions of the Galaxy* (COTG) is explored in detail, including how its signifying processes encourage players to break from the confines of McKenzie Wark's gamespace and create their own experiences. My hypothesis when embarking on this study was that this game offered players a chance to exert greater control over a genre than they were able to as viewers of televised (and independent) professional wrestling. However, many of the fans who play COTG vehemently adhere to the writings of the game's creator, never deviating from the storylines and narratives presented in the game. In this way, COTG represents both the utopian freedom of Castronova's more fun future and Wark's more ideologically limited gamespace.

Chapter three also follows an inclusive ethnographic methodology, featuring both surveys filled out by players of COTG and in-depth interviews conducted over the phone between myself and COTG players. In addition, my experience at two separate conventions devoted to the game is explored as data on this fan community. The data collected in this study presents an engaging picture of contemporary media audience processes, as these fans are eager to discuss both professional wrestling and COTG. Furthermore, these fans are also consumers of various other media texts, including various television shows, comics, films, books, and so on. Many of these fans of COTG also became creators themselves, producing bootleg characters or

joining the company that produces *COTG* in various capacities. My argument is that this small fan community represents a microcosm of both wrestling audiences and media audiences outside of professional wrestling. The processes of these fans who play with the media they are provided, offering their own narratives and playful versions of the game's raw material, as well as those fans who insist that the game must be played following a certain prescribed set of rules, encapsulate the playful processes of media audiences in the contemporary media landscape. Through a detailed analysis of this community and its play processes, a more lucid conception of media audiences becomes evident.

Chapter One

The Wrestling Audience: Observing the Play of Wrestling Smarks

Introduction

“I fucking love the Briscoes.” He then turned his head back towards the ring and started chanting, “Fuck-You-Bris-Coes (Clap; Clap; Clap, Clap, Clap).”

-Fan to my left during the Ring of Honor show on April 2, 2011

This quote illustrates the complex behaviors exhibited by wrestling fans, as this fan's words and actions seem completely contradictory. He began by turning to his right and excitedly stating how much he liked the tag team of Jay and Mark Briscoe, collectively known as “The Briscoe Brothers” in the independent wrestling company Ring of Honor (ROH). This support of the Briscoes would seemingly result in him cheering the team on during their match. Instead, immediately after his confession of support for the Briscoes, he fixed his gaze back to the ring and began jeering the tandem of wrestlers, leading chants of seeming hostility that were echoed by others in attendance for this ROH event. The chants were hostile in sound only, however, as this fan smiled throughout his jeering of the Briscoes, obviously enjoying the wrestlers' portrayal of heels as much as he was enjoying playing along by deriding their actions in the ring. This fan loved the performance of the Briscoes and confessed to admiring the wrestlers' abilities in the ring, but also knew that since they were villains the desired response from the crowd was for the wrestlers to be jeered. In this way, chants of “Fuck-You-Bris-Coes” become supportive demonstrations of appreciation by the fans, calling out that they are appreciative of the efforts of these performers pretending to be villains in the ring. This performative discrepancy where fans become part of the performance and yell out chants that are simultaneously inconsistent with

their opinions and representative of their appreciation for the performance represents a conundrum for scholars attempting to study these media audiences.

Indeed, the complex behaviors of wrestling fans explode the various models of media audiences that have dominated scholarly discourses. These behaviors necessitate a new model for understanding media audiences, one that accounts for the concept of play. The leading scholar of play, Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), posits seven rhetorics of play in his influential book entitled *The Ambiguity of Play*. With a background in developmental psychology and human development, Sutton-Smith offers a taxonomic record of play in this book, collecting what scholars and psychologists had said about play and presenting all of these discourses of play to the reader. The fact that Sutton-Smith describes play as various rhetorics accounts for the “ambiguous” nature of the play concept, as the concept itself defies categorization. Instead, Sutton-Smith looks at how the concept is rhetorically constructed and positioned, focusing on how various discourses on play shed light on play itself. By focusing on play as various rhetorics, the discursive nature of the concept is highlighted, allowing for these categories to be described as seven distinct rhetorics. None of these identified rhetorics are reductively the play concept itself, as instead each rhetorical category consists of what has been said about play. Sutton-Smith’s seven rhetorics of play offer a framework of what has been said about play that is applicable to the range of behaviors exhibited by media fans, and in particular the wrestling audience examined in this chapter.

Applying Brian Sutton-Smith’s (1997) seven rhetorics of play, this chapter demonstrates that the playful processes of media audiences transcend the binary categories that previous models of the media audience have posited. These seven rhetorics, which are summarized in Figure 1, include: the rhetoric of play as *progress*; the rhetoric of play as *fate*; the rhetoric of play

as *power*; the rhetoric of play as *identity*; the rhetoric of play as *imaginary*; the rhetoric of play as *self*; and the rhetoric of play as *frivolous*. In the previous chapter I defined the concept of play as a process that allows for seemingly irreconcilable differences to come together, a process of Deleuzian (1994) “becoming.” In this chapter I will look at this play process within the rhetorical framework posited by Sutton-Smith, focusing on how the processes of play both fits within these seven rhetorics and defies the rhetorical categories by challenging their very structures. After all, play is a process of moving past these fixed categories. In addition, these seven rhetorics of play will be examined alongside cultural studies concepts that help explain the utility of play as a theoretical lens for understanding audience practices (as evidenced in Figure 1). These rhetorics of play will provide a framework for understanding the complex behaviors exhibited by the wrestling audience observed during *WrestleMania* weekend and reveal the need for a model of understanding media audiences as playful entities that willfully traverse various identities and subjectivities when engaging media content.

Sutton-Smith's Rhetoric of Play	Description	Corresponding Theory/Concept
Progress	Focus on children's play as part of development	Anthony Pelligrini (1995) – Childhood psychology and development
Fate	Focus on games of chance and gambling	Clifford Geertz (1973) – Deep play
Power	Focus on sports and conflict	Antonio Gramsci (1971) – Hegemony; Stuart Hall (1973) – Active Audiences
Identity	Focus on play as fostering a sense of community	Dick Hebdige (1979) – Subcultural Style and Homology
Imaginary	Focus on imagination, creativity, and art	Roland Barthes (1975) – Jouissance; Jacques-Alain Miller (1966) - Suture
Self	Focus on the desirable experience of the player	Pierre Bourdieu (1984) – Cultural Capital; Carl Jung (1964) – Shadow, Individuation
Frivolity	Focus on play as wasteful or unproductive	Susan Sontag (1964) – Camp

Figure 1

This chapter will chronicle the complex behaviors I encountered during *WrestleMania* weekend between April 1 and April 3, 2011 in Atlanta, Georgia. Over that weekend I attended three wrestling events and observed the fans at each show. Rather than focus on what was going on onstage, this chapter will reverse the spectacle of professional wrestling by highlighting the behaviors of the fans in attendance. Normally these fans view the action in the ring, but in this chapter this relationship is inverted where the fans' behavior takes center stage. The three events where I observed these behaviors were a Ring of Honor show at Center Stage in Atlanta on April 1, 2011; a second ROH show on the afternoon of April 2, 2011; and WWE's annual *WrestleMania* event, which was held at the Georgia Dome on April 3, 2011. WWE, being the largest and most successful wrestling company in the world, stages its largest event, *WrestleMania*, in a different city each year. Fans come from around the world to attend this annual event, making this weekend the most significant of the calendar year for the wrestling genre. In addition, smaller wrestling companies like Ring of Honor follow WWE into these locations each year to take advantage of the influx of wrestling fans to a particular destination each year. ROH has done this for five straight years, and the combination of an independent wrestling company like ROH with the genre's most mainstream organization, WWE, allows for an extraordinary sampling of the diversity of the wrestling audience. Each year *WrestleMania* becomes a destination event, a weekend where the wrestling audience descends upon a host site and indulges in as much wrestling content as they can handle. And this wrestling audience acts as both willful participants and spectators, active contributors and passive reactors, and wrestling marks and wrestling smarts. In short, the wrestling audience is comprised of smarks: people who vacillate between each of these binary categories as they play with the content of professional wrestling.

“I Can Smell the Blood” – The Aura of Liveness

Media fandom has many guises. Scholars have attempted to describe the practices of media audiences from the perspectives of fans as resistant to messages (Hall, 1973), as creative contributors who produce works of fan fiction (Jenkins, 1992), and as vulnerable entities that may succumb to mediated messages (Wertham, 1955). In addition, *where* fandom is studied impacts our interpretations of fan behaviors. David Morley (1992), for example, found that studying television audiences in a laboratory versus in their living rooms yielded drastically different results. Scholars such as Elizabeth Bird (2003) advocate an inclusive ethnographic methodology in order to study media audiences from a variety of perspectives and contexts. I follow Bird’s methodology by looking at the wrestling audience in different manifestations in each chapter of this project. In this chapter, I focus on the wrestling audience at the staging of wrestling events during *WrestleMania* weekend. This focus on being present with the audience leads off this project due to the importance that ethnography places on presence (Hine, 2000) – actually going to a destination and immersing oneself in a given culture/subculture. It is here where the wrestling audience exhibits its fandom in its most distilled form, making it of paramount importance for this project.

This focus on presence is not meant to disparage other ethnographic methodologies. Hine’s insistence on a correct way to perform an ethnography ultimately limits what she is able to learn about a given subject or group. For example, the ethnography in this chapter will be insufficient for understanding how wrestling fans use wrestling content in their everyday lives. *WrestleMania* weekend is an annual occurrence, but it happens only once a year and for many of

these fans the genre of wrestling is a part of their identity throughout the year. Secondly, many of the people at the events I examined usually engage wrestling texts via their television or computers in their homes rather than in a live setting. These moments of mediated exposure are equally integral for understanding the processes of the wrestling audience to the live settings I examined during *WrestleMania* weekend. In fact, for many fans I talked to at the Ring of Honor shows, this was their first time seeing a live ROH show, as it was the company's first foray into the state of Georgia to hold an event (the company usually runs in the northeastern United States). Many fans also traveled great distances to be in Atlanta for *WrestleMania* weekend, making the entire weekend's activities a true destination for wrestling fans.

Although this ethnography will not tell us everything about the wrestling audience, it does give crucial information about how fans of both WWE and ROH engage the genre of professional wrestling. By looking at the processes of the wrestling audience at these events we can see what is important to these fans because this is wrestling fandom at its most intense. Within these live performances, fans gather with other fans, distinguishing this live experience from mediated ones that are shared with relatively few others (if any others at all). In addition, the live performances of these events are closest to what could be described as the "aura" of the genre, referring to some transcendental or innate quality of the performance that cannot be captured by reproductions of the event (Benjamin, 1936). In addition, scholars in television studies often accounted for this privileging of the live experience by focusing on the "liveness" of the television experience and claiming that the experience of the medium was most closely associated with "the real" (Gripsrud, 1998). This privileging of the interpersonal or live experience over mediated forms of communication is something that media scholars have wrestled with throughout the discipline's history, and it is imperative for understanding the

practices of the wrestling audience to investigate both contexts. Rather than create a hierarchy here, this project will explore both contexts since both provide information unavailable to the other. This chapter focuses on the interpersonal and live setting while chapter two will highlight the processes of the wrestling audience that manifest in mediated and online contexts.

An example that perfectly illustrates how being there in person provides information that is unavailable to audiences watching on television or the internet took place during a match on the second Ring of Honor show at Center Stage in Atlanta. The match was between the aforementioned heel team of Jay and Mark Briscoe wrestling a tag team known as The All Night Express, who were Kenny King and Rhett Titus. On the previous show the night before these two teams had brawled with each other, setting up this encounter as a grudge match and letting the audience know that the staged violence would be amplified during the encounter. The fans in attendance on Saturday were certainly excited at the beginning of the match that took place between the teams immediately following the brief intermission, and this excitement was heightened when the match turned into a bloodbath. During the match Jay Briscoe and Rhett Titus both “bladed,” referring to how wrestlers cut their foreheads with a hidden razor blade in order to bleed during a match. The faces of both Briscoe and Titus were adorned with crimson, as the blood covered much of their face and spilled onto the canvas. This was all visible to both the live audience and the audience watching on internet pay-per-view (iPPV) at the time. What was not available to the iPPV audience, however, was the scent of iron that permeated the intimate Center Stage venue. One fan stated aloud that he could “smell the blood” and in the next instant the scent had wafted to my seat, which was one row and several seats away from this fan. This scent resulted in a sort of wave of excitement and movement in the audience, a signifier of authenticity that engaged the sense of smell to those there in person.

The sense of smell was just one of the notable benefits of being there live for this event, as the scent of iron hung in the air during the aforementioned match between the All Night Express and the Briscoe Brothers. There was also a kinesthesia within the crowd during these events, as during moments where fans would mark out they would often move into the aisles or slap hands with their friends and neighbors, resulting in the audience exhibiting a kinesthetic motion throughout each event that mirrored the ebbs and flows of each wrestling match in a vicarious experience of physicality. Sound was also a key sense for those there in person, as the chants from the ROH fans are much more pronounced live than they are on DVD copies of the events. For WWE, sound is even more integral to the experience as many performers have loud pyrotechnic displays that accompany their elaborate entrances, and the sounds of these pyrotechnics is not nearly as prominent when watching on television. One fan in front of me, in fact, spent most of her evening at *WrestleMania* with her hands clasped over her ears so that the sounds of the pyrotechnics was somewhat muffled.

The presence of information or experience that is only available to those in attendance marks the live performance of wrestling events as a form of privileged space. It is within this live setting that the Benjaminian aura of the wrestling spectacle presumably exists. In fact, on many ROH DVDs that are sold to the company's fans, the announcers of the matches state that, "You must be here live to truly experience ROH." WWE echoes these sentiments with commercials that air during their televised events, with one ad campaign in particular that featured fans stating that, "I was there when..." and then they would fill in an iconic moment in the company's history, intimating that they had a better experience of that moment since they were there in person rather than watching on television. Of course, both companies are also trying to sell this liveness to their audiences, as they stand to gain from selling the notion of this

atmosphere to their fans so that they will purchase tickets to live events. But it also is significant that within these privileged spaces there are wrestling fans sharing a communal experience that is distinct from their normal mediated experience of the genre, marking all moments within these privileged spaces as special or distinct.

It is also within this live privileged space where the performativity of the wrestling audience is most visible. Mirroring sports, the presence of the live audience in the staging of wrestling events allows for the audience themselves to become part of the spectacle. These fans are acutely aware of their responsibility as members of the audience when they are there live. They are aware that for those watching on television and on the internet, their level of excitement is crucial for the overall spectacle of the event. For example, many ROH fans criticize the audience that shows up for certain shows in specific geographic locales, suggesting that if the crowd performed better they might have positively impacted the show. One online reviewer who goes by the screen name of “mxcal” and reviews each of ROH’s events that are released on DVD stated that, “The crowd is lousy too. The Long Island crowd always blows” when discussing a 2006 release entitled *How We Roll*.¹ This reviewer pans the event, and suggests that the crowd’s lack of enthusiasm negatively impacted his enjoyment of the show as a whole.

The live audience also must perform for the wrestlers who are performing for them, making their role in the spectacle of the event even more pronounced. During the three events over *WrestleMania* weekend, I noted many fans who remarked how exhausted they were after each of the shows. One fan described the first ROH show as a “freight train” since he cheered so much for the wrestlers. He noted that since they were working so hard in the ring he felt that he needed to cheer their efforts, even though by the time the main event was over (it lasted over

¹ <http://mcxalsreviews.yolasite.com/103howweroll.php>

thirty minutes) he was completely drained and felt as though he had been hit by the aforementioned “freight train.” This sense of responsibility that many in the live audience felt at the events is another way that the live event becomes a privileged space, since this sort of reciprocal relationship between the audience and the wrestlers is somewhat obscured in the mediated duplication of the event. Fans who attended these shows live felt that they had to perform as well, both for the benefit of those there in the building and those who may watch in other spaces and at other times.

The three live events examined during *WrestleMania* weekend are also significant to understanding the processes of the wrestling audience because they are sites that can be investigated ethnographically. With so many wrestling fans coming to Atlanta for this one weekend, there is a tremendous opportunity to engage these fans and observe their behaviors at each event. For this chapter I talked with some fans outside of each venue about their experience of the show, identifying myself as an ethnographer who is interested in the behaviors of the wrestling audience. These fans were given consent forms that they could take with them for their records, although the interviews themselves were very informal. I was most interested in observing their behaviors during the events themselves, and therefore the account that follows is clearly focused on how the audience performed during the three events attended during *WrestleMania* weekend.

As an ethnographer, I am also suited for this project as I have an accumulated knowledge of both the wrestling genre and its fans. I have immersed myself in this world as a fan since my childhood, happening across the WWF² on Saturday morning in the late eighties. I also

² WWE was known as the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) prior to 2002 when the company lost a court battle with the World Wildlife Fund for Nature and changed its name to World Wrestling Entertainment.

remember being there live for my first wrestling event with my father at the UNO Lakefront Arena in New Orleans on January 14, 1989, where Hulk Hogan defeated the Big Boss Man in the main event and escaped the handcuffs of the villainous Boss Man by exerting his superhuman strength and ripping the handcuffs in two pieces. The point of this accumulated knowledge is to express how this participant observation will be rooted in a larger context of wrestling fandom rather than be viewed as an isolated event. The processes exhibited by the wrestling audience during *WrestleMania* weekend 2011 are the proverbial “tip of the iceberg” for this subcultural community of wrestling fans, and as we shall see the ways that these fans engage the wrestling genre explodes the models of media audiences posited previously by scholars.

Sutton-Smith and the Rhetorics of Play

Brian Sutton-Smith’s (1997) seven rhetorics of play provide a useful framework for understanding the complex behaviors of the wrestling audience. Sutton-Smith uses the term “rhetoric” to stress that defining play is problematic given the nature of the term, stating that play “is a metaphoric sphere that can conjoin what is otherwise apart and divide what is otherwise together”(p. 93). This passage indicates that Sutton-Smith embraces the vastness of the play concept, as no single definition is enough to encompass play’s ambiguity. This description of play, what I described as the process of bringing together or becoming in the previous chapter, is also discursively constructed by seven rhetorics that encompass how the term is culturally mobilized. Sutton-Smith, in justifying his use of various play rhetorics, states that:

“It needs to be stressed that what is to be talked about here as rhetoric, therefore, is not so much the substance of play or of its science or of its theories, but rather

the way in which the underlying ideological values attributed to these matters are both subsumed by the theorists and presented persuasively to the rest of us”(p. 8).

The seven rhetorics offered by Sutton-Smith reflect how play is rhetorically constructed and ideologically mobilized in our culture. In this way the term itself has various connotations, a signifier that denotes various cultural practices. For this reason each of Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics of play will be examined alongside key theories and concepts that clarify how these play rhetorics function culturally.

The seven rhetorics of play that Sutton-Smith identifies and that will structure this chapter are play as progress, fate, power, identity, imaginary, self, and frivolity. These categories each refer to how play is culturally disseminated and understood. Play as progress often deals with the notion of development, usually in children and animals. The rhetoric of play as fate is often used to describe games of chance, including the notion of life itself being controlled by the gods or fate. The rhetoric of play as power usually refers to sports and conflict, although it also deals with the rules of society and patriarchy. The rhetoric of play as identity focuses on the feelings of belonging and community formation, as well as the formation of individual identity for players. Play as the imaginary is often discussed in the realm of art and aesthetics, focusing on imagination and creativity as the fundamental aspects of play. The rhetoric of play and the self focuses on the individual and what is desirable for the individual player, usually focusing on solitary activities and the quality of the experience for the player. Finally, the rhetoric of play as frivolous is antithetical to the notion of productivity or the Protestant work ethic, as here play is often derided as a waste of time or of little value.

These seven rhetorics provide a framework for examining the practices observed during *WrestleMania* weekend. The examples provided in this chapter within Sutton-Smith’s framework are representative of how these processes could be categorized and subsequently used

to implode the very notion of category itself. This means that many of the examples presented in the following pages could also be illustrative of more than one category, which by its very nature is reflective of the play concept. Rather than present a fixed, immobile taxonomy of the wrestling audience and its behavior, this chapter allows us to begin to understand the complexity of this audience and illustrate the necessity of a concept like play to account for how this audience engages wrestling texts. The ambiguity and fluid nature of the wrestling audience destabilizes the inclination of presenting its practices as a monolithic entity or under a single interpretation, as these behaviors are much more playful. Instead, we begin to grasp the type of model of a media audience required to account for the complexity of its behaviors.

“The Single Best Weekend of the Year” – WWE, ROH, and the Wrestling Audience

I was very much looking forward to this weekend both professionally and as a wrestling fan. As Bryan Alvarez (2011) notes in his review of the event, “It is, if nothing else, the single best weekend of the year to see awesome live professional wrestling.” Wrestling fans from around the world congregate in one city for a weekend and take part in a variety of activities in celebration of the wrestling genre, marking their identities of professional wrestling in its various incarnations. WWE’s *WrestleMania* event structures the weekend’s activities, as it is the driving force that brings wrestling fans and organizations to a select city each year. This event takes place annually on a Sunday in late March or early April. *WrestleMania* serves as the culmination of WWE’s annual storylines, where the company’s performers meet for the biggest wrestling show of the year. This year was marked by the return of one of the company’s biggest stars, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, to WWE after a seven-year absence. In addition, feuds

between performers such as announcer Michael Cole against legend Jerry Lawler and veteran performer Triple H against the undefeated Undertaker³ were set to culminate at the event.

WrestleMania could be described as WWE's version of a Super Bowl where the narratives of the entire season culminate in one huge event, making the event special to fans of WWE.

WWE enjoys a dominant position in the wrestling industry, operating in a near-monopolistic state since the company's acquisition of its biggest rivals, World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) in 2001 (Guttman, 2006; Reynolds & Alvarez, 2004). Since that time many smaller organizations have opened and operated on an independent level, with one, Total Nonstop Action (TNA), even attempting to combat WWE on a national scale.⁴ However, these rival wrestling organizations are minor threats to the WWE juggernaut. Rather than compete outright with WWE, many smaller organizations take advantage of WWE's successes by following the company into markets where they draw a significant number of wrestling fans. This is precisely the idea of independent wrestling organizations such as Ring of Honor (ROH) and Dragon Gate USA (DGUSA), as both of these smaller companies take advantage of the large number of wrestling fans WWE draws each year to *WrestleMania* by following them to the destination of *WrestleMania* and holding shows throughout the weekend. The result is a weekend full of wrestling from a variety of promotions where fans can binge on as much professional wrestling content as they can handle. Most fans are in town for WWE's *WrestleMania* event, but for the most fervent fans of the

³ The Undertaker's "streak" of consecutive victories at WWE's annual *WrestleMania* event is one of the company's biggest annual storylines, as this year The Undertaker character brought a streak of eighteen consecutive victories to his match with veteran Triple H.

⁴ TNA moved their weekly program, *TNA Impact*, on Spike TV to Mondays to compete head-to-head with WWE's flagship *Monday Night Raw* on USA in January 2010. This competition featured TNA being trounced in the Nielsen ratings and moving their show back to Thursdays by March 2010. Dave Meltzer (*The Wrestling Observer Newsletter*) and Bryan Alvarez (*Figure Four Weekly*) covered this saga in their weekly newsletters.

genre, these smaller promotions offer wrestling content that is removed from the slick, mainstream content WWE provides.

The 2011 version of *WrestleMania* weekend took place in Atlanta, Georgia from April 1 through April 3. Ring of Honor, as has been their custom for the past six years, held two shows during the weekend taking advantage of the influx of wrestling fans to one destination. This was the first time that ROH held shows in Georgia, as the promotion is based out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and runs most often in New York, New York. ROH's shows were on Friday night, kicking off the weekend's wrestling events, and Saturday afternoon. Dragon Gate USA also held shows during the weekend, following *WrestleMania* for the second year in a row and making their debut in the Georgia market. Dragon Gate USA's shows were on Saturday evening and Sunday morning so as to not compete directly with ROH's events or *WrestleMania* itself. Due to the similarity between ROH and Dragon Gate USA I refrained from including an analysis of the Dragon Gate USA shows for this project. I did manage to attend one of their shows, however, and many of the behaviors exhibited by the ROH crowds were echoed at this event. The first Dragon Gate USA show was held at the same time as WWE's Hall of Fame induction ceremony, and the second was Sunday prior to *WrestleMania*. Sunday evening featured the WWE's *WrestleMania* event itself. An epilogue to the weekend's festivities was WWE taping an episode of their weekly series, *Monday Night Raw*, in Atlanta on Monday evening. I refrained from including this event in my ethnography since *WrestleMania* serves as the traditional conclusion to WWE's major storylines. The following night was subsequently the beginning of the next "season" of WWE narratives, and seemed superfluous in relation to the goals of the project, which is to examine the behaviors of various incarnations of wrestling audiences.

I should also note the demographics of the wrestling audience observed during *WrestleMania* weekend. Of course it is difficult to discern true demographic information from such a large group, particularly when I am observing the practices of these fans from within the crowd and have no access to their lives outside of these three events. However, many who I spoke with were from out of town and had traveled to Atlanta for the weekend's events. One can interpret the fact that many of these fans traveled varying distances to be in attendance as a sign that they are not poor, although some were certainly trying to minimize the costs of the trip by staying in hostels and cheaper hotels rather than renting rooms near the Georgia Dome (the site of WWE's event). I also noted that there were many families in attendance for WWE's *WrestleMania*, while the fans at the two ROH shows were more decidedly younger males who had come with other male friends. There was certainly a diversity of races and ethnicities at the events, but the most represented gender and age at all three shows was males between the ages of eighteen and forty. I attempted to get an accurate account of those fans in attendance, but my demographic information is undoubtedly limited by my own vantage point, especially at the immense *WrestleMania* event with over sixty thousand people in attendance. The tickets for the two ROH shows were \$25 each, and my WWE ticket cost \$55 and was very far away from the ring, which means those who were seated closer to the ring and on the floor paid significantly more money for their seats. These prices are also indicative of those in attendance being economically comfortable enough to travel to Atlanta for the weekend and afford tickets to these events. This runs counter to the presumption that wrestling fans are all lower class, as those in attendance could be seen as conspicuous consumers of wrestling content who were determined to be in Atlanta for this weekend. And some that I spoke with proudly stated how they made sure to attend *WrestleMania* each year and planned on going again the following year.

Surveying the Wrestling Audience – Center Stage and the Georgia Dome

Friday evening and Saturday afternoon featured events from the independent wrestling promotion Ring of Honor (ROH)⁵. Ring of Honor has presented wrestling since 2002, primarily generating revenue through DVD sales of their live events. In the past year the company has started to also present Internet Pay-Per-Views, or iPPVs, which are live streams of their events on the website GoFightLive.com. Both ROH shows from *WrestleMania* weekend were iPPVs, and since it was the company's first time in the Atlanta market the expectations amongst fans (and myself) was that the shows were going to be really good. For example, on the ROH company message forum, sample posts anticipating the two shows included comments like, "Both shows are looking amazing so far,"⁶ and "Both nights will be all kinds of awesome by the looks of the announced matches."⁷ Arriving at Center Stage in Atlanta, where the shows were being held, this expectation was echoed by many waiting in line. I overheard one group of fans in front of me in line discussing how many ROH shows they had seen live in the past and how each time it was a great value for their money. This notion of value is significant to the promotion, as ROH is dependent on each ticket sale and iPPV buy to remain in business given its limited operating budget. This issue is freely discussed by fans of ROH, as on the company's

⁵ At the time the company was owned solely by Cary Silkin. On May 21, 2011 the company was purchased by Sinclair Broadcasting Corporation, a company that own and operates television stations in thirty-five markets in the United States (Meltzer, 2011).

⁶ GenericLuchadore. (2011, March 23). ROH Honor Takes Center Stage Night 1 and Night 2 Hype and Discussion Thread. Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?topic=3964.30>

⁷ JigsawVs.Jason. (2011, March 26). ROH Honor Takes Center Stage Night 1 and Night 2 Hype and Discussion Thread. Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?topic=3964.30>

message forum one post, when debating whether to attend a ROH show or a baseball game, states that, “if we enjoy the company it behooves us to financially support it...if too many people stop buying tickets and DVDs the company will cease to exist.”⁸

Approaching the Center Stage venue I saw long lines of predominantly male fans garbed in black t-shirts. Many of the shirts that were immediately apparent featured wrestling themes, mostly of the ROH promotion. The ROH shirts, including phrases such as “We Don’t Imitate, We Innovate,” and “ROH Wrestling: No Limits,” were worn with pride by these male fans, a marker of both subcultural capital and familiarity with this niche promotion within the landscape of the wrestling genre. In addition to many black ROH shirts, I also noticed several t-shirts from other independent wrestling organizations, including Dragon Gate USA and Pro Wrestling Guerilla (which is based on the West Coast of the United States). There were also several men in WWE gear, mostly consisting of jerseys for a past year’s *WrestleMania* event or for current WWE wrestlers who had formerly worked for ROH, including talent such as CM Punk and Bryan Danielson (Daniel Bryan in WWE). The presence of former ROH talent in WWE serves as a source of pride for many fans of ROH. The success in mainstream wrestling of their beloved independent stars seems to validate their own tastes and dedication to independent organizations such as ROH, as if they knew these performers were talented and destined for greatness within the wrestling genre. They also are identifiers of subcultural capital within the wrestling audience, as these ROH fans can document their fandom of particular performers “before they were popular.”⁹

⁸ Jimthy. (2009, October 20). Since the Phillies made the World Series... Message posted to <http://rohwrstling.com/MessageBoard>

⁹ One male fan in particular at the second ROH show on Saturday April 2, 2011 openly talked outside of the Center Stage venue about how CM Punk was much better in ROH than in WWE,

Wrestling t-shirts were not the only ornamentation that stood out amongst the gathering of ROH fans at Center Stage in Atlanta. It was a decidedly male crowd, and within a minute of arriving at the line on Friday night I noticed a guy wearing a shirt that proudly demanded that women “Show me your titties.” This made several women waiting in line decidedly uncomfortable, as one woman whispered to our group that she had never been so conscious of her own gender before this moment. I did not notice any women being harassed by this crowd, but the overwhelmingly male gathering to witness a spectacle of hypermasculinity such as professional wrestling certainly made several women who spoke with me uncomfortable. This notion of discomfort for women highlights the homogenous nature of the ROH fan community, as there were so few women there that gender became a mark of difference for the few women who did accompany their husbands/boyfriends to the event. In fact, of the several women I spoke with at both ROH shows during *WrestleMania* weekend not one indicated that she was attending the event of her own accord. Instead these women were venturing into a decidedly male domain via a male partner, either as a favor or out of curiosity. I did speak to two women after their experience of a ROH event, however, and both attested that they were shocked at how much they enjoyed the event.

Upon entering Center Stage there was lots of what could be described as an exuberant vitality from the numerous wrestling fans in attendance, as excitement was high for the first shows of the weekend and of ROH in the state of Georgia. There were groups of people walking by each other, as well as many discussions amongst small circles where participants energetically waved their arms and gestured while they spoke of wrestling. Center Stage had a lobby where the bar was located, as well as a guy serving slices of pizza. Immediately lines for both alcohol

and now that all of these “poseurs” like him it made him relish the matches he had in ROH “before he was popular.”

and pizza started to snake around the lobby as fans got their supplies ready for the evening. In addition, merchandise tables were set up in the lobby for ROH DVDs and t-shirts. Many fans congregated around the merchandise table to peruse the latest offerings from the company, and many could be seen putting newly purchased ROH shirts over the shirts they wore to the event. There were also two tables set up for merchandise being offered by two veteran wrestling personalities: Luke Williams, who was a former competitor in WWE as part of a tag team called The Bushwackers, and Jim Cornette, a notable wrestling manager who has worked for nearly every wrestling promotion in the United States over his lengthy career. Currently, Jim Cornette works in an advisory role with Ring of Honor, and before the show he was meeting fans and selling his personal merchandise, including autographed photographs and a scrapbook he put together of his time managing a tag team in the 1980s known as The Midnight Express. These veterans attracted a significant crowd of fans eager to meet talent they recognized from wrestling history.

As I made my way to my seat I scanned the crowd and noted that there were very few kids in attendance. The age of the crowd in Center Stage seemed to be in the range of mid-twenties to late-thirties, with a scattering of older fans bringing the average age of the audience higher. There were a couple of kids there with their parents, and their ages ranged from early teens to around eight years old, based on their appearance. The venue's capacity, with the wrestling ring taking up space on the floor, was around one thousand fans, which is a sizeable crowd for ROH and towards the higher end of their average attendance (Meltzer, 2011). The venue itself was perfect for wrestling, as several fans around me indicated upon entering the area that housed the ring. One fan explained that, "They should have wrestling here every week. It's perfect." The seating was raised on three sides around the ring in a stadium structure. Given the

size of the venue there was no seat that did not have an excellent view of the ring. It was a perfect vantage point with the luxury of an intimate setting for the crowd, which was literally hovering over and around the ring where the wrestlers would perform. On the fourth side there was a stage, presumably where a musical artist would perform at the venue. There were several rows of chairs set up on the stage as well for fans to be even closer to the ring, although they did not have the benefit of the stadium-style seating and had to look over and around those sitting in front of them on the stage. However, they did have the benefit of being on an almost even level with the wrestlers in the ring, as the height of the ring was parallel to the stage itself.

The Center Stage venue for the two ROH shows was dramatically different from the Georgia Dome, where WWE's *WrestleMania* was taking place. Approaching the Georgia Dome, the first thing that was striking was the sheer size of the event. The Georgia Dome houses the Atlanta Falcons, the city's NFL football franchise, and seats over sixty thousand fans. Compared to Center Stage, the magnitude of this venue was overwhelming. We arrived early to observe the fans who were congregating in anticipation of the WWE event, and even showing up several hours prior to the gates opening there was a large contingent of fans present at the Georgia Dome. These fans gathered inside of large tents stationed around the venue, and inside these tents was the latest WWE merchandise. This merchandise ranged from numerous t-shirts of the most popular WWE performers to tote bags with the WWE logo emblazoned on the side. There were also large foam fingers for sale in the shape of popular WWE performer John Cena's most notorious hand gesture, which is when he puts his fingers in front of his face and mouths the words "You Can't See Me" before punching his downed opponent. The fans say his catchphrase along with him and these foam fingers were designed for fans to mimic the gestures of Cena while they recite his catchphrase. There were also numerous replica title belts for sale,

although in the WWE lexicon the word “belt” is forbidden since it has too many perceived connections to professional wrestling prior to WWE’s national expansion in the 1980s (Alvarez, 2011).¹⁰ Instead, they are referred to as “championships,” and WWE was selling these for fans to wear as part of their costuming at WWE events. What was noticeably absent from the WWE merchandise was DVDs of their events. At the ROH shows the majority of the merchandise was DVDs of past shows that were for sale to their fans so they could see past matches. Here at *WrestleMania* there was seemingly less emphasis on past WWE events or matches despite its vast library of wrestling events (including many defunct wrestling companies’ libraries that have been purchased by Vince McMahon). This lack of DVDs for sale indicates that WWE’s conception of its audience at live events is one that privileges wearable merchandise that can be displayed to others in the audience, leaving wrestling matches on DVDs as something to be sold on a more private basis online via the company’s website or at retail outlets like Best Buy. After all, there is nothing visually arresting about wearing a DVD while replica championships can make audience members stand out as fans of WWE.

The makeup of the WWE audience differed drastically from the two ROH events from earlier in the weekend, as there were many more young fans at *WrestleMania* than at the ROH shows. There were lots of kids with their parents at the show, and in some instances the parents seemed to be a bit detached from the event and waited patiently for their children to stand in line to purchase the latest WWE merchandise. However, these disinterested parents were outnumbered by those parents who seemed equally excited about *WrestleMania* as their children. I noticed many families where the parents were wearing WWE merchandise alongside their kids.

¹⁰ The presumption, as reported by organic intellectuals like Bryan Alvarez, is that WWE feels like the term “belt” is too closely connected to the genre of wrestling prior to WWE, as the next chapter illustrates WWE is attempting to market itself as “sports entertainment” instead of professional wrestling.

I met one family in particular who explained how they were from Kentucky and planned their family vacation around attending *WrestleMania* for three years running. The father discussed how they explore the city in the days leading up to the event, and the culmination of their family vacation is the event itself. I interviewed others who traveled to Atlanta for *WrestleMania* from locales such as Mississippi, Ohio, Florida, Canada, and France. Clearly those that traveled such a great distance were not disinterested parties and were heavily invested in this WWE event.

After a lengthy journey through the Georgia Dome we finally found our section and entered through the tunnel into the area where the actual event would be held. You could not help but be overwhelmed by the enormity of the Georgia Dome and the stage for *WrestleMania* when entering into the venue. You could barely see the ring where the actual wrestling would take place, as it was a small square in the midst of innumerable rows of seats and an enormous lighting structure that hovered above. What was unmistakable was an enormous stage where the performers would make their entrances. Above the stage were huge block letters that spelled out *WrestleMania*, dwarfing the actual wrestlers who would make their entrances on the stage. The ramp to the ring was tremendously long, and above the ring were huge video screens. These screens were where I would watch much of the actual event, as the ring was too far away to truly see the performances of the wrestlers. It seemed as if every one in my section was happy with their seats, which cost fifty-five dollars before any surcharges were affixed to the price. Compared to the cost of the ROH tickets (twenty-five dollars each) however, I felt that these seats were grossly overpriced given how little action we could actually see. But my section seemed more pleased that they were in the stadium for *WrestleMania* live, as the live experience was what they were paying for rather than a perfect vantage point of the matches.

When I arrived at my seat I met many of the people who were sharing this section of the Georgia Dome with me. Among the cast of characters in this section included a guy costumed as the wrestler from the eighties known as Hillbilly Jim, who proceeded to drink through much of the event and wore a pair of denim overalls as part of his costume; a woman who was willing to bet real money on the winner of the match between The Undertaker and Triple H (and who would have lost money on the bet as she was sure Triple H was ending The Undertaker's streak on this evening); two families on vacation in front of me with young children who were very partial to certain wrestlers; an overweight and odorous fellow to my left who refused to say a single word throughout the evening; and a quintessential wrestling smart fan who criticized every single development on the show and complained for over four straight hours. In addition there were numerous fans who were less memorable characters but who carried on conversations about WWE and wrestling in general throughout the show. This cast of characters represents in many ways the variety of the wrestling audience, as well as the impossibility of comprehensively listing out the complete variety of fans that make up this audience. They were far more diverse than what I saw at the two ROH shows, which had a much more homogenous subculture. WWE, on the other hand, appeals to a more casual audience given its national television presence and marketing to children and preteens. However, the practices of these fans during *WrestleMania*, coupled with those fans observed at the two ROH shows, posits a range of behaviors that illustrates what wrestling smarks do when engaging these texts and how they act as playful audience members who exhibit the behaviors of both marks and smarts simultaneously.

Play as Progress

Sutton-Smith's (1997) seven rhetorics of play provide an excellent way of distinguishing the complex practices observed by the wrestling audience during *WrestleMania* weekend. The first of Sutton-Smith's seven rhetorics is the rhetoric of play as progress. This rhetoric of play deals with the concept's relegation to the realm of children, as it posits play as something crucial for the development of a child's psyche, readying the child for entrance into civilized society. According to Sutton-Smith, "most psychological play scholarship in this century has focused on the developmental stages children go through in their play" (p. 35). This rhetoric of play hinges on the development of the child, mobilizing the practice of play as something that becomes increasingly complex as the child matures into a fully functioning adult. The focus is on how children play, correlating various play processes with mental competency. For example, Sutton-Smith points to studies performed where play experiences impact a child's ability to solve increasingly complex problems (Bruner, Jolly, and Sylva, 1976) and where the presence of teachers and parents who encourage play leads to increases in children's literacy and comprehension skills (Bloch and Pelligrini, 1989). These studies are exemplary of the rhetoric of play as progress, locating play squarely within the realm of children and correlating it to a developmental stage, albeit a normally positive one.

This focus on play as part of a child's development situates play within the realm of children. However, there is another, more prominent, group I observed playing during *WrestleMania* weekend: adults. These adults complicate the discursive properties of play being part of childhood development since there were so many adults in the crowd at all three events I attended during the weekend. One way to look at these playful practices of adults in the wrestling audience is as an example of arrested adolescence, focusing on how these adults had not properly advanced through their developmental stages in childhood. On the other hand, these

adults could also be exhibiting a form of lifelong learning, performing their accumulated knowledge about being members of the wrestling audience when present at live wrestling events. Most prominently, these adults seemed to use play to temporarily return to an almost child-like state, marking out during wrestling events as if they were children who had not yet advanced through all of the developmental stages on their path to adulthood. This sort of nostalgia recalls a Bakhtinian (1965) “carnavalesque” sensibility, as wrestling fans subvert accepted decorum and behave in a playful manner while attending these events. Of course, this is a more utopian vision of the carnivalesque, but there is also a potential dystopian potential as well. As Robert Allen (1991) states when discussing the carnivalesque, “the carnival is a sanctioned, legalized, and hence defused arena for the expression of opposition to the dominant order. Thus, it can be read not as a rupturing of social control but as an instrument of social control: carnival allows subordinate groups to ‘blow off steam’ in a ritual and, therefore, in a politically ineffectual space”(p. 36).

This rhetoric of play as progress is applicable to many practices observed by the wrestling audience at both the two ROH shows and the WWE show during *WrestleMania* weekend. There were very few children present at the two ROH shows, as the audience for the independent promotion is composed of mostly men in their twenties and thirties. However, the rhetoric of play as progress can be applied to contextualize many behaviors of these adult fans. Within this rhetoric, the argument is that children who are encouraged to play become more competent and successful adults. Stereotypes about the wrestling audience, however, usually posit this audience as uneducated, low-income media dupes who are easily conned by the performance of professional wrestling. For example, comedian Daniel Tosh described professional wrestling as, “Broadway for hillbillies, it’s the third favorite white-trash pastime

behind incest and Nascar” on the episode of *Tosh.0* that aired on Comedy Central on February 15, 2011. This dismissal of wrestling and those who enjoy it can be contextualized within the rhetoric of play as progress, positioning those who are part of this audience as being less cognitively sophisticated. Of course, this critique is merely an ideological condemnation of certain mass tastes, creating a cultural hierarchy that privileges objects of high culture over those positioned as low culture (Gans, 1999; Bourdieu, 1984). What is powerful is the rhetoric itself, as this focus on play as progress lends itself to a process of labeling certain tastes and media audiences as being inferior. This rhetoric also exemplifies the value of play from the perspective of finding value in low culture. Many fans took pleasure in returning to this child-like state, marking out over matches at these events as if they were children themselves. This marking out was not because of their developmental inferiority, but rather a celebration of the carnivalesque properties of the event.

The wrestling audience at the ROH shows was noticeably awkward in certain instances I observed during the two events. This level of awkwardness, within the context of play as progress, is presumably reflective of individuals who have not developed a set of social skills that play practices can foster in childhood. Those who subscribe to this notion of play and developmental stages would look at many in this crowd and assume they were in a state of arrested adolescence, resulting in the awkward adults who populated these events. For example, during the intermission of the first ROH show on Friday night, I stood in line at the bar and talked with many fans who were excited about the first half of the show and the forthcoming matches over the duration of the weekend. When it was finally my turn to order my drink I took

two steps toward the bar before bumping into a man wearing a lucha-libre mask.¹¹ This fan was also picking his nose through the mask as he walked by, an action that is certainly discouraged at any public event, including a wrestling event. This fan continued his path and as I turned my head back to the bar I locked eyes with the bartender. She instructed me to give her a moment, as this display of a grown man in a lucha-libre mask blatantly picking his nose had proved to be her tipping point for the evening. She had either seen too many of these infractions during her evening, or this one infraction was so severe that she needed time to gather herself before returning to work. Whether one egregious infraction or the culmination of many minor affronts, the rhetoric of play as progress positions this behavior as evidence of an individual who still behaved in an adolescent or unacceptable (for an adult) manner.

The wrestling audience at WWE's *WrestleMania* was composed of many more children than the two ROH shows. These children's behaviors also fit within the rhetoric of play as progress since they are currently going through their development into fully functioning adults. These children presumably use play in their lives to become more competent adults. One key distinction between these children and the fans at the ROH shows is that many of these children are the presumed "marks" of the wrestling audience rather than "smarks." These children, having not yet gone through all of their developmental stages, exhibit behaviors that suggest they believe the action in the ring is legitimate sport or competition. Instead of understanding that wrestling is all scripted, such as the wrestling smart fan, many of the children I observed exhibited behaviors that suggest they believed the matches between WWE performers were not staged, scripted simulations of combat. And unlike the smark who is able to suspend disbelief to

¹¹ Lucha-Libre refers to wrestling in Mexico where many of the top stars historically wear signature masks to hide their identity. For more information on Lucha-Libre see Heather Levi's (2005) *The Mask of the Luchador: Wrestling, Politics, and Identity in Mexico* in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*.

behave like a mark even though he has been smartened to the way wrestling works, these children were legitimately marks who took pleasure in the presumption that what was unfolding was legitimate competition. If we take the rhetoric of play as progress seriously, the presumption is that in the future, as these children go through subsequent developmental stages, they will become the smarks of the wrestling audience, although many will undoubtedly not remain part of this wrestling audience as they age.

One key example of children behaving like marks at WWE's *WrestleMania* was at the conclusion of the main event between the top WWE star of the past five years, John Cena, facing former reality show star and current WWE champion, The Miz, for the WWE title. John Cena has historically received mixed reactions from the fans in WWE, with older male fans jeering him relentlessly for his limited technical skill in the wrestling ring, as well as for how his character is portrayed on WWE television (he is often referred to as "Super Cena" by these fans since he rarely loses)(Alvarez, 2011). On the other hand, Cena is extraordinarily popular with both kids, who seem to view him as a hero since he often wins his matches and plays by the rules of fair play, and women, who seem to admire his chiseled physique (Alvarez, 2011). The Miz, on the other hand, plays the character of a heel by always cheating to win his matches by nefarious means and by being simultaneously smug and arrogant. Many of the fans who loathe Cena were ready to support The Miz, making for a contentious and playful atmosphere for the main event. Further complicating the allegiance of the fans was the specter of The Rock, as he was the host of *WrestleMania* and had physical altercations with both Cena and The Miz on WWE television leading up to the PPV event. The Rock is also a successful movie star who was the prime drawing card for the event, as he was making his return to WWE pay-per-view events by hosting *WrestleMania* after seven years away from WWE.

The brief match between The Miz and Cena ended when both men tumbled over the guardrails around ringside. The referee counted to ten and both men were unable to return to the ring, resulting in a draw. Of course, this draw was designed to bring out The Rock who ordered the match restarted since he was the host of the event (and presumably had this sort of power in the diegetic universe of WWE for the evening). Immediately after restarting the match, however, The Rock turned on Cena and gave him one of his signature wrestling maneuvers, allowing Miz to pin Cena and retain his title. The entire event was promoted on the potential confrontation between The Rock, the company's biggest star from seven years ago, and John Cena, the company's biggest star since The Rock departed for Hollywood. In the end the audience was given what was promoted, an altercation between these two stars. However, some young fans were completely taken by surprise by The Rock's actions, even though the whole event was sold by promising a confrontation between these two performers. Two young children in my section began to openly weep when Cena was pinned, as they couldn't believe that their hero had fallen, especially thanks to this man who was a performer in WWE before they had even been born. This display of emotion marks these children as still progressing through much of their early development, not yet at the point where they understand that wrestling is not real. These children could be identified as marks, the least sophisticated of the members of the wrestling audience.

Of course, their parents or other members of the wrestling audience could inform these children of wrestling's scripted nature. Many wrestling fans, myself included, remember how often they were told that wrestling was "fake." For most adults, however, it appears that they do not want to ruin the mystique of wrestling for the marks in the audience, instead slipping into a common sensibility by marking out with these children during wrestling events. From an

autoethnographic perspective, I know that I did not want to ruin the enjoyment these children had for their wrestling experience by pulling them aside and informing them that wrestling was fake, and I did not notice any one else attempting this either. As an example of play as progress, it seems as if these behaviors by adults of facilitating children's suspension of disbelief are examples of lifelong learning in the wrestling genre, as these fans learned a set of unspoken social rules that prohibit them from sabotaging the experience of wrestling marks.

The overt display of emotion from these young fans after the main event of *WrestleMania* also fits the rhetoric of play as progress since public exhibitions of emotion, such as openly weeping, are often culturally discouraged. As we progress we presumably come to understand that one must always be composed, fighting back or retraining tears and sobs to preserve public decorum. Explicit displays of emotion are often labeled as a loss of control, and these behaviors are often met with derision in public settings (Lewis et al, 1990). Rather than try to compose themselves, these children were content to openly weep despite their parents' pleas to gather their belongings and begin to make their exit from the Georgia Dome. These children were unconcerned with preserving public decorum, as their frustration with the action in the ring reduced them to wailing sobs.

Another way that the behavior of children at WWE's *WrestleMania* was reflective of the rhetoric of play as progress was in the manner that these children dealt with their frustration over the behavior of others in the crowd. When the action in the ring developed differently than they had hoped, they could not contain themselves and burst into tears. There was nothing they could do to impact the outcome of the match, as the performers in the ring were both too far removed from the fans in my section and the direction of WWE's narratives was already in motion, despite how much these children may have wished otherwise. These children could impact what

went on in their immediate surroundings, however, and when the crowd would do something that they did not agree with, their reaction was representative of an individual who has not fully progressed through their developmental stages. This went on repeatedly in my section during the event, as kids would attempt to yell down to other fans, no matter their age relative to the child's age, when a fan rooted for a character that the child did not like. What resulted were awkward exchanges where a child would yell that a heel "sucks" to a much older fan who was cheering on the villain. This cheering of the villain will be explored within another of Sutton-Smith's rhetorics of play later in this analysis. What is illustrative of the rhetoric of play as progress, however, is how these children would behave almost combatively with adults and other children during the event, engaging in shouting matches with their fellow fans when someone expressed a viewpoint opposed to their own. These behaviors could also be seen as an example of marking out, where these children were losing themselves in play at this event and rooting on their favorite performers within the gamespace of professional wrestling.

A key example of a child behaving like a mark and being incapable of handling his own frustrations with those around him was during a match between Randy Orton, a popular babyface in WWE, and CM Punk, a heel who made his name in Ring of Honor between 2002 and 2005 and is now a featured villain in WWE, at *WrestleMania*. Given my familiarity with CM Punk from ROH DVDs, I was looking forward to see how he would perform in this match, and this curiosity was not lost on some kids seated in front of me. One child asked me as the match was going on if I "really wanted Punk to win, or was I just kidding?" Playing along with this young fan I stated that I did indeed want Punk to win, and the kid seemed delighted to inform me that Randy Orton was going to "kick his butt." Many of the adult fans in my section were equally derisive of CM Punk, stating how dirty he looked and how conceited he came off on television.

At one point near the climax of the match, CM Punk began to appear as if he would win, which I clapped for, momentarily losing myself in the performance. A young fan in front of me was so upset at this he began to bludgeon me with his oversized John Cena foam fingers. I did not interpret the aggression as malicious, as it seemed to me that at this point in the match the kid was caught up in the spectacle and was playing along with the match. However, his actions are illustrative of a child who did not fully understand what was acceptable behavior in public. He interpreted my behavior as antagonistic, and he responded in a manner that could be interpreted as hostile (although it could also be interpreted as playful since the foam fingers would do less harm than his clenched fists). He was promptly scolded by his parents and turned around for the remaining few moments of the match, perhaps learning through this moment of play what the boundaries of play are in this setting. This moment of development is a perfect example of how the rhetoric of play as progress helps contextualize the complex behaviors of fans at these events.

While the rhetoric of play as progress is helpful in understanding some of the behaviors of the children in the audience, supporting their categorization as marks in the wrestling audience, this rhetoric provides little explanation for the behaviors of adults. As Sutton-Smith points out, the rhetoric of play as progress suggests that the child progresses forward when he or she plays, “while the adult goes sideways...Presumably adults have already grown up, so the supposed growth virtues of play are irrelevant”(1997, p. 47). This rhetoric fails to provide a framework for understanding the playful practices of adults, and there were innumerable examples of adults playing throughout *WrestleMania* weekend. For one, I was playing with the child who used his oversized John Cena foam fingers to pummel me during the match between CM Punk and Randy Orton. I was certainly exaggerating my affinity for CM Punk, proclaiming him to be far superior to the child’s hero. When he began to use the foam fingers to pummel me,

I exaggerated the effects of his blows, yelling out that he could neither silence me nor CM Punk and laughing during the exchange. My play during this example is not explained by the rhetoric of play as progress, as I am an adult who has (presumably) gone through all of my early childhood development. In addition, the behavior of the child could fall outside of this rhetoric as well, since his actions could be interpreted as part of a game where he and I understood the rules, even if his parents and the rules of public decorum did not.

This example illustrates the complexity of marking out for wrestling fans, as I was willfully behaving as a mark in my exchange with the child concerning CM Punk. My marking out could be understood as an attempt to recapture the enthusiasm a mark would feel for wrestling texts, returning to an almost childlike state while interacting with the young fan. In this way marking out is not only an example of a child losing control, but also of an adult taking control of an experience, willfully recapturing the enthusiasm of a child in the context of a wrestling performance. Much like the concept of play itself, marking out is represented by a simultaneous gain and loss, and when correlated to the rhetoric of play as progress the focus becomes at what point does an individual willfully enact this process as opposed to when it is something outside of an individual's control. That is why this rhetoric is useful for understanding the practices of wrestling audiences, as it reveals the agency of the individual in relation to their own development.

The lack of children at the two Ring of Honor shows during *WrestleMania* weekend complicates the utility of the rhetoric of play as progress since these were mostly adults. And while there were examples of some adults who were in a state of arrested adolescence, such as the aforementioned fan picking his nose in front of the bartender, most of the fans at these shows seemed like they had developed normally from childhood. Of course, they behaved in a manner

consistent with the rules of this subcultural community, marking them as distinct from other social settings or contexts. For example, when I arrived at Center Stage on Friday evening I engaged one fan in a conversation while he was trying to sell his extra ticket. We talked about his trip to Atlanta from Arizona for the weekend of wrestling festivities and what he was expecting from the ROH show that night. I turned from him briefly to talk with some one behind us in line about what he was looking forward to that evening. This exchange lasted around twenty seconds before I turned back to the fan from Arizona. In one of those ethnographic moments that one wishes was captured on film, the guy had donned his own lucha-libre mask of the popular Mexican wrestler La Parka and was now “in character,” as he was more stoic and silent in his fearsome mask than he was a minute prior when he humbly talked about how intimidated he was making his way all the way to Atlanta on his own. He wandered off moments later only to turn back up, unmasked, at the ROH show the next day. Clearly this fan was playing with his own identity, including the characteristics of his personality depending on his costuming at a given moment. He was not two different people, but instead both of these characters and each of these characters depending on the context and social situation.

As an adult, one who had made his way on his own across the country for the weekend, the rhetoric of play as progress is complicated by this type of adult play. Rather than seeing this fan as someone who has either successfully or unsuccessfully progressed through all of his developmental stages, this behavior is simultaneously exemplary of lifelong learning within the genre of professional wrestling and deconstructing the notion of progress itself. This fan learned how to use the codes and conventions of the wrestling genre to engage aspects of his personal identity while also demonstrating that there is worth in regressing through play rather than only progressing via play. Via the use of a lucha-libre mask, this fan used play to return to a childlike

state where he could pretend to be a whole new character, in this case a wrestling superstar. This identity play is a form of marking out, as he was recapturing a childlike exuberance via his play, destabilizing the very nature of progress and childhood development. We shall return to this example later in this analysis, as the nature of play itself complicates the distinctions between each rhetoric Sutton-Smith identifies. What is significant here is how the play of children and adults can be understood within the framework posited by the rhetoric of play as progress while simultaneously complicating that rhetorical category.

Play as Fate

The rhetoric of play as fate posits a context that moves beyond the notions of development and progress discussed in the previous section. Instead of revolving around how one develops from childhood to adulthood, with play firmly positioned in the realm of childhood, the rhetoric of play as fate highlights the more universal aspects of play. Sutton-Smith describes this rhetoric as “various forms of fate as play, such as the attributions that the gods are at play, that the universe is at play, that our brains are at play, and finally that we are creatures of the play of fortune and luck, as exemplified by games of chance”(1997, p. 53). Within this rhetoric of play, our very lives, no matter our age or level of development, fall within the realm of play. This focus on fate is most pronounced with the notion of death, as every day our lives are at risk of ending. We may negotiate that risk by taking care of our health or avoiding certain activities that are dangerous, but there are innumerable instances of even the healthiest person perishing in an automobile accident or coming down with a terminal illness.

With life itself serving as the ultimate game of fate that we all play, this rhetoric also focuses on how certain risks that players undertake potentially provide exhilarating rewards. Sutton-Smith calls these risks an “illusion of mastery over life’s circumstances” within this rhetoric of play as fate (1997, p. 54). All games of chance take as their opponent the universe of possibilities, the player attempting to exert his or her own mastery over the machinations of universal forces. This desire for mastery is why games of chance serve as the primary examples of this play rhetoric, as these games feature the player challenging both the physical and metaphysical “house” and tempting the fates. Clifford Geertz (1973) explores how the Balinese employ games of chance within their cockfights, aligning their own identities, as well as their village’s collective identity, with their cocks as they do battle. This connection the Balinese feel with their cocks makes the cockfight deep for the Balinese, as much more than a cock is on the line in each cockfight. This connection between the cock and the Balinese is further heightened for Geertz with the prevalence of betting on the results of the cockfight, as neighbors of the representative cock in each fight will often bet money on the outcome to further make the battle deep.

This rhetoric of play as fate would at first glance seem out of place within the realm of professional wrestling and *WrestleMania* weekend. After all, wrestling is a scripted form of competition where the outcomes are predetermined and the performers are working together to create an athletic spectacle for the viewing pleasure of the audience. Nothing is technically on the line in each match, as the two men are not necessarily competing with each other over fake championship belts or prize money. However, for the smart fan who follows the backstage maneuverings of the wrestling landscape, there are some things that are at stake in a wrestling match for the performers, even if they are working together to achieve these goals. First of all is

the desire to produce a match that is enjoyable to the audience. Smart fans will gauge the quality of each match, noting how the performance was able to facilitate the suspension of disbelief during the encounter. Those who are adept in the ring at this facilitation of the audience's suspension of disbelief may be rewarded with more prominent positions on the card, and subsequently more money in the company. Secondly, the lives of the wrestlers are at stake in every match that they take part in, as one wrong move or moment of carelessness could lead to disaster. For example, a match between Darren Drozdov (who wrestled in WWE as Droz) and D-Lo Brown in 1999 featured Drozdov landing awkwardly on his head and neck, resulting in him being a quadriplegic¹² (Foley, 2001). Every wrestling match is embedded within the rhetoric of play as fate, with each performer assuming the risk of this profession each time he or she steps in the ring. Finally, the genre of wrestling is tied closely to this rhetoric of play as fate with the extraordinary rate of wrestlers who die early in life. For example, of the fifty-one performers at WWE's *WrestleMania VII* in 1991, a shocking fourteen of them had died prematurely (Garvey, 2011). If another sport or media genre featured such a shocking percentage of dead performers there would indeed be outrage. For wrestling, however, it is a scary reminder of how these performers tempt fate by taking part in this industry.

While wrestling itself can be examined within the rhetoric of play as fate, so too can the fans who comprise the wrestling audience. I noted numerous behaviors during the three events at *WrestleMania* weekend where fans were engaging the genre of wrestling in a manner consistent with Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of play as fate. The most obvious occurred during the match between The Undertaker and Triple H. Triple H is a wrestler who is one of WWE's

¹² Since the injury in 1999 Darren Drozdov has reportedly regained some strength in his upper body, but not his legs (<http://1miketerry.blogspot.com/2011/01/dad-why-are-footballers-so-injury-prone.html?zx=13698048a8c0c67d>).

biggest stars, as well as the heir to the company since he married Vince McMahon's daughter, Stephanie McMahon, in life outside of wrestling's diegesis. He has reportedly used this position of power backstage to better his position in front of the camera in WWE's narratives (Toepfer, 2006). This position of power created some intrigue for his match with The Undertaker, since there was the potential that Triple H would use his backstage influence and demand that he end the prestigious streak of The Undertaker. The Undertaker had won eighteen previous matches at *WrestleMania*, creating a legacy at WWE's largest event that he is unbeatable. This streak was the prominent selling point of the match, as WWE television focused on the potential for Triple H, who had been a champion in WWE on thirteen different occasions, to end The Undertaker's unblemished record at *WrestleMania*. This focus on the streak contributed to making the outcome of the match "deep" for many of the fans in attendance, as the prestige of The Undertaker's streak was on the line and in jeopardy from not just a diegetically skilled wrestler, but from an extradiegetic threat with considerable backstage power and influence. By calling on the collective memories of past *WrestleMania* matches, as well as the knowledge of Triple H being affiliated with the decision makers in WWE, this match contained a narrative richness that deepened the connection many fans felt to the outcome of the match.

This added presence of The Undertaker's streak made the match deep for many fans, suggesting that the rhetoric of play as fate is applicable considering that there are added stakes to what was taking place in the ring. This rhetoric of play as fate was heightened by one fan in particular who wanted to increase the stakes further, adding a layer of intrigue to this already significant match on the show. This fan, as mentioned earlier in this analysis, was a middle-aged woman who was at the event with her male partner. The couple was there without any children and overheard me talking about who would win the match between The Undertaker and Triple H

with other fans in our section before the show even started. She was so confident that Triple H would win that she demanded we put some money on the outcome of the match. We laughed at this prospect, as she did not appear serious and I did not have any money to make such a bet. However, the absurdity that we would bet on the outcome of a professional wrestling match was not lost on either of us as we laughed at this supposed bet and made a fun connection in our section of the Georgia Dome. The match between Triple H and The Undertaker took place almost three hours after this fictitious bet was made, and during the entrances of both wrestlers I caught the eyes of this fan several seats to my right. She looked back at me and made the hand gesture of rubbing her thumb across two of her fingers, signifying the presence of money in her hands, smiling the entire time. This bet made the outcome of the match even deeper for both of us, even though neither of us had any intention of actually living up to the stakes of the bet.

This addition of currency into the spectacle of the wrestling match and its predetermined outcome is consistent within the rhetoric of play as fate, as this fan wanted to heighten the stakes of this match by adding a side bet to the encounter. Even more fascinating was that we did not need real money to heighten these stakes, as her gesture several hours later suggests that the stakes were already high for us due to the mere intimation of a side bet. This bet was completely playful itself, with no actual currency changing hands. Instead, the thought of winning the bet was enough to make our engagement with this match fall within Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of play as fate. We had increased the stakes in a match with already significant stakes, and while we could have heightened the stakes further by making a real bet, the suggestion of a monetary bet was enough for us to see the match within the framework of a game of chance. When the match concluded, with The Undertaker successfully extending his winning streak at *WrestleMania* by defeating Triple H, I once again looked over to this woman who had her arms in the air and a

huge smile on her face. She responded by mouthing the words, “You got me,” in my direction, as if we had just had a contest where she was defeated. Once again, no money was exchanged, but the suggestion of a monetary bet was enough to create a sense of deep play between two members of the wrestling audience during this match.

The addition of a side bet, or another game of chance, into the outcome of the match between Triple H and The Undertake marked an instance of WWE’s audience behaving in a way consistent with the rhetoric of play as fate. This inclusion of a game of chance was outside of the diegetic universe created by WWE, as well as outside of the wrestling match itself since it was between two fans in the stands. The two Ring of Honor shows, on the other hand, featured many instances of audiences reacting to the action in the ring in a manner consistent with this rhetoric of play as fate. At these shows, the reactions were based on the dangers and threats to physical safety the wrestlers faced during their matches, as opposed to something provided solely by the wrestling audience like a side bet. In this way the action itself became the focal point of this fate rhetoric, as fans reacted to the dangers and death defying maneuvers during the matches. This distinction is a textual difference between the WWE and ROH products, as the ROH wrestlers are generally smaller and perform riskier maneuvers in the ring while WWE performers are generally larger and work a slower, more methodical style of match that allows each maneuver to resonate with the audience.¹³ The result of this distinction at the ROH shows is a significant number of maneuvers where wrestlers risk bodily harm in an attempt to facilitate the suspension of disbelief necessary for their match to appear like a legitimate fight.

¹³ These distinctions are discussed in detail in the subsequent chapter of this dissertation as well as by wrestling journalists Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez on the April 2, 2011 edition of *Wrestling Observer Radio* on the www.f4wonline.com website.

One example of a risky maneuver performed at the ROH shows that forces the wrestling audience to behave in a manner consistent with Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of play as fate is a maneuver called "The Cop Killer," which is used by the wrestler Homicide. Homicide is a character who resembles a street thug, as his mannerisms include hand gestures of gang signs as hip-hop music (Beanie Sigel's "The Truth") blares over the venue's speakers. His shirt reads, "Thug Life," and he wears a bandana covering much of his face during his entrance. Most significantly, his name is a synonym for murder, positioning him as a character of immense danger. On the first night, Homicide hit his "Cop Killer" maneuver on wrestler Caleb Konley, dropping him almost directly on his head and locking his arms so that Konley could not break his fall. The maneuver comes off frightening in its potential to do serious harm to the wrestler who takes the impact of the maneuver, in this case Konley. As Homicide hit the maneuver many fans yelled out, "Ohh," and "Oww," even though Konley was the heel in the match. In this instant the fans disregarded heel and babyface distinctions and expressed both concern for Konley's wellbeing and gratitude for Homicide facilitating their suspension of disbelief in the match by making them momentarily disregard the scripted nature of professional wrestling. In this instant these fans "marked out" for the maneuver, as the risk was so high for Konley that it did not matter that the genre was one of simulated battles with choreographed maneuvers.

After receiving Homicide's "Cop Killer," Konley laid on the mat for several moments. There was some concern that Konley was seriously injured, as if Konley and Homicide had tempted the fates once too often and now tragedy had struck. However, Konley was helped to the back by the referee after the match and most fans reassured themselves that Konley was only selling the maneuver to legitimize its potency to the wrestling audience in attendance. "The Cop Killer" was one of many maneuvers at the two ROH shows where fans were wondering about the

safety of the performers while simultaneously thanking the wrestlers for making them worry within the context of a match. This thankfulness could be described as bloodthirstiness to the observer unfamiliar with the genre of wrestling, as often fans would cheer after particularly violent maneuvers with high risks associated with them. In addition, after particularly devastating maneuvers, or more accurately maneuvers that appeared to be devastating, there was a large amount of movement within the crowd to go along with the audible gasps and exclamations of the wrestling audience. Fans would turn their heads away from the ring when a wrestler would land on his head or in a manner that included great potential for injuries to the head. Many fans would also leap from their seats when a particularly impactful maneuver was performed, including one fan in his late twenties who would literally pace in the aisle during several matches on the first ROH show at Center Stage. This movement, as well as the audible sounds made by those in attendance, is reflective of both the stakes for the performers and the appreciation many fans felt for the performance itself. This crowd seemed very attuned to how much risk there was in the creation of ROH matches, and they seemed to enjoy the performance more when the risk was highest.

This connection between risk and reward reached its zenith on the second ROH show in the aforementioned match between Jay and Mark Briscoe (The Briscoes) against Rhett Titus and Kenny King (The All-Night Express). During this match both Titus and Jay Briscoe were cut open, spilling copious amounts of blood during the match. This spectacle of blood, with the odor permeating the intimate Center Stage venue, brought the fans into a state of giddiness, with grown men leaping into the aisles of the Center Stage venue. One fan who was seeing ROH for the first time and was seated to my right was giggling with excitement during this match, with others contributing to the audible hum in the venue. Rather than being bloodthirsty, these fans

were excited about how well the performers had facilitated their suspension of disbelief. The spectacle of actual blood covering the faces of these wrestlers signified the dangers of the match and the sacrifice of these performers in their ability to bring the audience to this state of suspending their disbelief. Rather than being bloodthirsty, these fans were exhibiting their appreciation and excitement while simultaneously being reminded of the risk included for these performers. The stakes were raised in this match, making the match deep as these performers risked their health in the bloody spectacle. This “mark-out” moment was infectious, as by the end of the match the entire crowd was on their feet chanting “R-O-H” and “This-Is-Wrestling” with their arms in the air, appreciating what they were witnessing.

The behavior of the wrestling audience is distinct from bloodthirstiness since on the whole there is great concern for the wellbeing of the performers in the ring. These fans are not cruel or vindictive in their appreciation of wrestlers’ physical sacrifices and often exhibit great concern for their safety when something goes wrong and a performer is actually injured in a match. For example, Bryan Alvarez recounted the behaviors of fans at a wrestling event put on by the Chikara promotion in February 2008 when a wrestler named Lince Dorado was injured during a match. The promotion stopped the show and asked all of the fans in attendance to please remain seated so that the paramedics could get to the building and escort Dorado from the ring and to the hospital. According to Alvarez, this petition was made with no entertainment being provided to the fans in attendance, as the show was completely stopped and every one had to simply wait for an ambulance to get to the building and take Dorado to the hospital. Rather than pandemonium breaking out with fans attempting to leave the venue, every one remained in their seats as instructed and the paramedics were able to arrive at the venue, assist Dorado, and bring him to the hospital without having to navigate the human traffic of fans leaving the venue.

These fans obviously put the wellbeing of Lince Dorado above all other matters and there was no poor behavior of fans at the event, even when the promotion announced they were canceling the rest of the show out of concern for Lince Dorado's health (instead choosing to postpone the rest of the show until a later date and focus on updates to Dorado's condition).

The rhetoric of play as fate can be applied to the risks associated with the wrestling genre, but there were also some extratextual practices observed at the two ROH shows that can be examined within this rhetoric as well. Most significantly, the continued existence of the company itself can be looked at within this rhetoric. ROH was owned by Cary Silkin at the time of these shows, and there were numerous reports from wrestling journalists that the company was not doing well financially (Meltzer, 2011; Alvarez, 2011). As opposed to WWE, ROH was not a publicly traded company with vast resources at its disposal. This made the presence of new fans of paramount importance at the shows, as reaching these new fans was key to the survival of the company. I met several fans during the two ROH shows who were seeing the company and its wrestlers for the first time, and in many ways these new fans would serve as indicators of how the company would do going forward. If these new fans rejected the kind of wrestling presented by ROH, their rejection could be extrapolated to the larger wrestling audience. However, most new fans I saw at the two ROH shows seemed to love the events. The fan mentioned during the discussion of the bloody match between The All-Night Express and The Briscoes was particularly skeptical of this "rinky-dink" version of wrestling, but by halfway through the first match he was chanting "R-O-H" with others in attendance, impressed by the performers in the match.¹⁴ This dependence on impressing new fans and ensuring that these fans got their money's

¹⁴ The match was between The Kings of Wrestling (Claudio Castagnoli and Chris Hero) and the team of Adam Cole and Kyle O'Reilly.

worth at the events can be looked at within the rhetoric of fate, as the very survival of the company is connected to the experiences of these fans.

The experiences of fans and how they interpreted the event was also on display at WWE's *WrestleMania*. While WWE has millions of dollars in cash reserves due to its long, successful history, the company still attempts to make this event its largest and most successful performance of the year (Meltzer, 2011). With so many fans coming in town for the event, it is paramount that these fans have an enjoyable experience so that they may travel to WWE events in the future, perhaps even the following year's *WrestleMania*.¹⁵ As mentioned above, I met one family in particular from Kentucky who explained how they were from Kentucky and planned their family vacations around WWE's *WrestleMania* event for three years running. This family had attended WWE-sponsored activities in the days leading up to the show, including attending WWE Fan Axxess, which featured fans being able to get autographs of certain WWE performers and seeing lots of WWE memorabilia.

This family had clearly made the entire experience a family destination, with two young children enjoying the WWE festivities and the parents taking pleasure in their children's love of WWE. Late in the show WWE ran a video of some of the activities that had occurred at Fan Axxess during the week. As the video was running, one of the kids from this family was prominently featured mimicking the ring entrance of WWE performer Kofi Kingston, who has a hand gesture during his entrance where he stares into the sky and slides one hand off of the other and above his head. This kid was mimicking the activity and was captured on camera at the event, and now his action was displayed in front of the over sixty thousand fans in the Georgia Dome and all of the fans watching at home on pay-per-view. The excitement of this moment in

¹⁵ I personally talked with fans from Canada, Ohio, Kentucky, Arizona, Washington, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and France during the weekend's events.

the spotlight was plastered on the child's face in front of me, as he yelled out "That's Me" when his likeness appeared on the screen for a few seconds. It was very similar to winning the lottery for this child, who was one of thousands of fans who attended the event and was now selected as being part of the commercial for next year's Fan Axxess event. Even more excited than the child who appeared on the screen were his two parents, who beamed with a mixture of both pride and child-like exuberance when their son was so prominently featured. They turned to every one in our section to make sure they knew that their son was just on the screen, repeating phrases like, "That was him," and, "He was just up on the screen," as they pointed at their child and smiled enormous smiles.

The examples in this section are illustrative of how instances of fate or chance are tied to both the performance of professional wrestling and the activities of the wrestling audience. These actions and behaviors are not the only way to understand these processes, but by being consistent with Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of play as fate we are provided a framework for understanding these behaviors that complicate previous conceptions of the media audience. These practices can also be explored and read within other paradigms of Sutton-Smith's play rhetorics, demonstrating once again the complex and ambiguous nature of play itself. The point is not to capture these processes and fit them perfectly into tight theoretical compartments, but instead to open them up and examine them alongside the other behaviors and processes on display during these three events.

Play as Power

Sutton-Smith's third rhetoric of play is the rhetoric of play as power. There is some overlap here with the rhetoric of play as progress, as this rhetoric of play focuses on the socializing function of play. Unlike the rhetoric of progress, the focus is less on individual development and more on social norms. The rhetoric of play as power positions play as an ideological function, one where we are taught what is and what is not acceptable in a given culture. Sutton-Smith states that, "contests have a civilizing influence, and that play expressions can be viewed as either uncivilized, irrational expressions of power or as civilized and rational ones...subordinate classes sometimes subvert these play forms to express their own hidden rhetorics of resistance or subversion"(1997, p. 74). This rhetoric presents play as a site of struggle over hegemony. Play becomes both a tool of the powerful as well as a space where the rules of society can be challenged or subverted.

This rhetoric of play most closely aligns with previous models of the media audience, as it posits players as either ideological subjects who have been successfully socialized or as resistant subjects who challenge the dominant messages encoded within a particular ideology. In this way players mirror the models offered by scholars such as Stuart Hall (1973) and David Morley (1992), where audiences are bombarded with encoded messages of the dominant ideology but are able to resist many of these ideological messages, or at least negotiate these messages by accepting some portions of the message and resisting others. Because the concept of play moves us outside of these binary oppositions, however, there is the possibility for us to look at the wrestling audience both within and outside of the encoding/decoding model of media audiences posited by the Birmingham School of cultural studies. In addition, play allows us to deconstruct the distinction between the powerful and the powerless as a binary category, as well as between productive and unproductive resistance. The examples in this section fall within the

paradigm offered by scholars such as Hall and Morley, but taken alongside the examples in the other six rhetorics of play offered by Sutton-Smith, the necessity for a theory of media audiences that uses the concept of play becomes evident.

The rhetoric of play as power is also closely tied to the work of Roland Barthes (1957) and his analysis of wrestling in French society in the 1950s. Barthes argued that wrestling is a spectacle where what is on display are concepts such as justice and suffering. The heel, in Barthes' case a villain named Thauvin, is always reviled by the audience and must be punished in the context of the match. The hero must make the villain suffer in order to denote the social order where villainy, gluttony, and underhanded schemes are undesirable. In this way the ideology of French society is both upheld and made evident for the audience, reifying the values of a culture within the context of a wrestling spectacle while simultaneously reinforcing the interests of the powerful. Rather than depicting an unjust society where villainy is rewarded, Thauvin must be punished to make explicit the understanding that the rules of society are fair and just, and those who try to attenuate those rules will be punished. Barthes' influential essay on wrestling is the iconic piece on the genre, clearly positioning professional wrestling as an ideological project or the manifestation of play as power. And there is clearly a very astute textual analysis within Barthes' critique of wrestling, although to suggest that this is the only reading of wrestling texts greatly undermines the complex and varied ways that audiences engage all media forms. It is undoubtedly an analysis that is limited by its reliance on structuralism, assuming that there is one all-encompassing interpretation or reading of a given text where the entire field of post-structuralism has demonstrated that subjectivity and ideology

greatly impact each individual reading of a media object.¹⁶ Barthes' analysis of wrestling clearly demonstrates the potential for reading wrestling texts as ideological, expressions of power from the dominant class and intended as agents of socialization for subordinate classes.

The most blatant example of resistance I saw at either ROH show during *WrestleMania* weekend occurred after the intermission of the first event on Friday night. The second half of the show began with a match between two of the company's best in-ring performers, according to many I overheard in Center Stage that evening, Roderick Strong and Davey Richards. I overheard one fan state to his friend that, "This will be the best match of the entire weekend, I promise you," while another told his neighbor that, "These two had the best match at the show I saw in December." At the same time, the flow of alcohol started to take its toll on many in the audience, as while these two wrestlers were making their entrances I could hear several people exclaim how drunk they were. One fan in particular decided to use this liquid confidence to, as he said, "Fuck with ROH by cheering the heels and booing the faces." This demonstration of resistance was clearly fueled by alcohol, but it still represents how fans are able to resist the intended message of ROH and behave in a subversive manner. During this match the fan kept chanting, "Da-Vey-Sucks," even though Davey Richards was playing the role of babyface and Roderick Strong was positioned as the heel in the match. The fan would also begin this chant during moments of silence in the crowd, clearly attempting to make his heelish presence felt in the audience at Center Stage. This desire to subvert the narratives of ROH by refusing to give the desired reactions is illustrative of how fans can resist the intentions of the encoders.

This fan's desire to challenge ROH further complicates the rhetoric of play as power as he was both resisting the encoded messages of the match and playing with his own identity as a

¹⁶ For example, see Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, NY.

member of the wrestling audience. By being such a vocal detractor of Davey Richards, he was clearly marking himself as distinct from the majority of those in attendance who were rooting on Richards as the heroic babyface. The match itself also solidified this alignment of Strong as the heel and Richards as the babyface because Strong worked as the heel in the match, bloodying Davey Richards and controlling much of the match before Richards' come-from-behind victory in the end. With their roles clearly defined, this fan was playing the role of the antagonist, acting as the proverbial heel to the babyface audience by behaving in a manner inconsistent with the roles presented in the match. This fan was playing the heel further because of his clear statement where he loudly proclaimed that he was doing it simply to "Fuck with ROH." This fan was playing the role of the internet troll or wrestling heel by being confrontational and antagonistic with the audience and ROH itself. His jeers did not last the duration of the match, as eventually the audience began to police itself and shout him down with chants of "Shut-The-Fuck-Up" in a representation of hegemonic struggle where the audience at large seemed to decide that this fan's transgression was pushing the limits of acceptable behavior.

While the ROH shows had the most blatant attempt of resistance by a single fan, the WWE show also featured many acts of resistance from the vast audience present at the Georgia Dome. The most pronounced example of the wrestling audience resisting the content presented by WWE was during the match between heel announcer Michael Cole and forty-year veteran, and fellow announcer, Jerry Lawler. The match also featured WWE star "Stone Cold" Steve Austin as the special referee for the match, an added attraction to WWE's largest show of the year. The match received what many fans and wrestling journalists said was the best build in the weeks leading to the event on WWE television, with Cole playing the arrogant announcer who was destined to get his comeuppance from Lawler at *WrestleMania* (Alvarez, 2011). The

addition of Austin as the special referee was diegetically designed to ensure that Cole would not weasel his way out of the suffering that he was destined for at the hands of Lawler. Halfway through the match, however, a decipherable chant of “Boring” echoed throughout the Georgia Dome. This chant signaled that for many in attendance this match was either not living up to their expectations or was simply a match that the audience outright rejected. Even with Austin returning to be the special referee, it was a match between a sixty-year old man and an untrained announcer, and the match went on for much longer than any one expected. The chant of “Boring” was representative of the wrestling audience resisting the content that WWE was providing, and their presence at the staging of the event allowed for them to voice their displeasure while the match was taking place.

The “Boring” chants during the match between Cole and Lawler represented a macro-rejection of WWE narratives, as many in the audience were voicing their displeasure simultaneously. On a more micro level, however, there was one fan in particular who was seated in my section who rejected practically each and every aspect of WWE’s product. This fan was the quintessential smart fan described in the previous chapter, a wrestling fan whose knowledge of the backstage product and machinations of the wrestling industry overwhelms his ability to play the role of the mark. This sort of fan avoids the synthesis that is the wrestling smark, instead remaining on one side of the binary relationship between mark and smart. This smart fan was seated to my right through the duration of the over four hour *WrestleMania* event, and his commentary consisted of repeated rejections of WWE narratives. For example, during the opening match for the *WrestleMania* pay-per-view,¹⁷ this smart fan complained throughout

¹⁷ This match was the opening match on the pay-per-view broadcast, but was not the opening match for the live audience at the Georgia Dome. Prior to the pay-per-view beginning fans in Atlanta saw a match between Daniel Bryan and Sheamus for the United States Championship.

because the match was for the World Heavyweight Championship. The title situation in WWE is a bit confusing, as there is both a World Title and a WWE Title. One championship is defended on their Monday program *Monday Night Raw* (WWE Title) while the other is defended on their Friday television program *Friday Night Smackdown* (World Title). The reason for this is so that WWE can have two separate touring groups that stage events in different parts of the world, and WWE wants to make sure that a title match headlines their events (Meltzer, 2011). The match here was between babyface-champion Edge against heel Alberto Del Rio, the winner of WWE's January pay-per-view event known as the *Royal Rumble*. The smart fan seated next to me launched into a scathing critique of WWE for having the temerity to have a world title match open a pay-per-view broadcast, as this should be "no earlier than second from the top." His disgust was so pronounced that it drew the attention of several families seated around us, although this would not be the last time that occurred.

The smart fan's commentary continued throughout the show, and by the time the aforementioned match between CM Punk and Randy Orton occurred it had succeeded in angering several people in our section. The match between Orton and Punk began with the smart fan decrying the babyface qualities of Randy Orton, much to the dismay of several children who were big Orton fans. The smart fan stated that he did not understand how any one could like Orton since, "he wrestles boring matches and is portrayed as a sociopath," referring to Orton's propensity to dismiss villainous heels in the company with a running boot to the head, which signifies the opponent has a concussion and needs to take time off to recover. Given the severity that concussions mandate in the realm of sports and pseudo-sports it is indeed a severe representation of harm being performed by a presumed babyface, marking Orton as a somewhat problematic character. This critique of Orton is a hallmark of a smart fan, as it is a valid

criticism of WWE narratives, even if the marks and smarks in the arena are disinterested in the critique during the match. This rejection of Orton as a viable babyface is representative of how members of the wrestling audience can resist the intended readings offered by WWE, as this smart fan wanted something else and was not shy about voicing his critiques. However, these critiques did impact those around him, as later that evening a family asked for a group photo of themselves in front of the stage. The mother asked for the favor and the smart fan reached for the camera to oblige her, only for her to pull the camera away from him and sternly state, “Not you,” before offering the camera to me. Clearly the acts of resistance by this smart fan were having a negative impact on the community. Those around him saw his resistance as obnoxious, marking these behaviors as expressions of unproductive resistance that caused him to be marginalized by some members of the community.

The preceding examples demonstrate Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of play as power by featuring members of the wrestling audience resisting the dominant readings encoded in both ROH and WWE texts. These examples privilege the relationship between the text and the audience. However, there were many instances during *WrestleMania* weekend when the wrestling audience used these wrestling texts to play with more than the narratives provided by WWE and ROH. Instead, the wrestling audience was literally challenging societal rules, highlighting their artificial or constructed nature and subverting their presumed authority over their actions. These practices demonstrate the limitations of Barthes’ reading of the wrestling genre, as rather than existing as an Althusserian ideological state apparatus (1977) these wrestling events served as spaces where the rules of society were challenged. Rather than socializing members of the wrestling audience, as Barthes famously suggested in the 1950s, the performance of wrestling texts featured many instances of ideological destabilization.

One instance of the ROH crowd transgressing the norms of society happened practically every time a character named Truth Martini appeared during the two shows at Center Stage. Martini plays the role of a heel manager, guiding his stable of wrestlers and often cheating during a match by distracting the referee or slipping his wrestler a weapon to use on his babyface opponent. The character of Truth Martini is also one of a “life coach,” as he often talks in interviews about how he will help his current protégé see the truth and become the best man he can be, although this is often accomplished via nefarious means. In addition to his heel character, his costume accentuates the derision he receives from fans, as he is often dressed in velvet robes and large sunglasses while carrying around his famous prop, “The Book of Truth,” which is a large volume that is often used to bludgeon babyface wrestlers. Truth Martini also has long, stringy hair that combined with his velvet attire and wispy frame decorates him as an effeminate character in the realm of professional wrestling. Each time he appeared before the fans at the two ROH shows during *WrestleMania* weekend he was greeted with numerous jeers from the crowd, usually featuring phrases such as, “You Suck Dick.” This homophobia haunts the wrestling genre since wrestling matches usually feature two men in skimpy attire writhing around the mat together. However, the character of Truth Martini is what elicited this sort of homophobic outburst from the wrestling audience.

While watching these interactions between Truth Martini and the ROH fans during the two events at Center Stage I was initially very uncomfortable. After all, such blatant homophobia and hate is both offensive and simultaneously reductive, as it reduces the wrestling audience to every cliché that is leveled against fans of the genre. And by no means is this sort of behavior defensible. However, if examined within the context of play and the rhetoric of play as power these transgressions can be seen as productive because they transgress the rules of polite

society. As Laura Kipnis (1992) argues in her analysis of *Hustler*, it can be healthy or productive to transgress societal norms and expose their artificial nature. Kipnis states that, “*Hustler*, from its inception, made it its mission to disturb and unsettle its readers, both psycho-sexually and socio-sexually, interrogating, as it were, the typical men’s magazine codes and conventions of sexual representation”(p. 375). These homophobic outbursts from wrestling fans are similarly representative of unacceptable social behavior, and their unacceptability is what makes them powerful in this context. The Truth Martini character encourages these outbursts as well, as during the events at Center Stage he reveled in the jeers that he solicited from the wrestling audience. In this way the spectacle being staged during *WrestleMania* weekend becomes a space where the limits of acceptability are tested and destabilized. And it is not a coincidence that these transgressive experiments are enacted at wrestling and similarly low culture events.

Another example of this transgressive behavior from the wrestling audience during the two ROH shows features the predominantly male crowd interacting with female wrestlers. A match on the first ROH show involved only female wrestlers, as ROH had brought over two Japanese women, Hiroyo Matsumoto and Ayumi Kurihara, to compete against their top female wrestler, Sara Del Ray, and Serena Deeb, who formerly worked for WWE. The female performers in American companies like WWE are known as “Divas” and are more often evaluated based on their looks and hyperfeminine characteristics. The ROH women, as the audience discussed, were skilled wrestlers who wanted to provide an athletic contest that appeared real, consistent with the male performers of the evening. Rather than being solely objects, these women were presented as wrestlers in the same manner as the men on the show. However, this did not stop some members of the audience from attempting to objectify these

women with lewd chants such as, “I want to eat sloppy joes off your chest.” These catcalls were often shot down by other fans at Center Stage, an instance of the audience policing itself and exerting a sense of rules on the behavior of the fans in attendance. The catcalls were greeted with, “Shut-The-Fuck-Up” chants by others sitting around them, and in every instance I noticed succeeded in ending the lewd chants.

The aggression exhibited by the ROH fans towards those in the audience who were catcalling to the women in the match is notable for once again transgressing the norms of polite society. Like the previous example of Truth Martini, the exhibition of aggression by using the dogmatic command for an audience member to “Shut-The-Fuck-Up” is generally unacceptable behavior in our society, even if that person is also transgressing societal norms by being a blatant misogynist. As opposed to the Truth Martini example, the self-policing of the wrestling audience here demonstrates the collective identity of this subcultural entity – the Ring of Honor wrestling audience. These fans demarcated a collective identity, one where the sexist stereotypes that often attach themselves to the wrestling audience are unacceptable. I very much got the impression that this audience, in its attempt to police itself, was embarrassed that these women were on the receiving end of such stereotypical behavior, especially given how hard they were working in the ring to make their match seem competitive and realistic. In this instance the subculture was negotiating the limits of acceptability for its collective identity, and the battle between catcalling fans and subcultural community standards was on full display.

WWE’s *WrestleMania* also featured social transgressions from the wrestling audience, although the examples from WWE’s audience differ since WWE is composed of a much more heterogeneous audience. As opposed to the more homogenous subculture that makes up the ROH audience, WWE reaches across many demographic boundaries to draw a more casual

wrestling audience. WWE's presence on major cable networks like USA and SyFy represent its considerable mainstream reach, whereas ROH exists on fringe outlets like Mark Cuban's HDNet channel and the company's own website.¹⁸ There were less blatant examples of the wrestling audience policing itself during *WrestleMania*, since the heterogeneous nature of the WWE audience lends itself to a greater variety of behaviors. However, there were still instances during *WrestleMania* where the rules of polite society were challenged by the wrestling audience. It must be noted that the makeup of the wrestling audience, even one as diverse as WWE's casual fanbase, is decidedly working class, as recent data compiled by wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer indicate that the average income and education level of wrestling fans is below the levels of other professional sports.¹⁹ These working class fans challenged many of the rules of the dominant class during the event, exerting a sense of autonomy and power via their behaviors.

For example, during a match between babyface Rey Mysterio and heel Cody Rhodes a young fan to my left shouted out, "Cody, You Suck!" The vigor in his condemnation was arresting, as there was a noticeable silence in my section when he decided to voice his critique of Rhodes, making his remark stand out. Further, his prepubescent voice had a shrill to it, making the words ring out even more. The fact that this fan was heckling, albeit out of earshot, another human being was one social transgression. That this fan was under ten years old was another, and this was the one that stood out the most. His parents were seated near him when he yelled out, and rather than scold their son for his behavior they rubbed his head in a consoling, almost prideful manner. Here at *WrestleMania* this child did not have to conform to the rules of

¹⁸ At the time of this writing ROH was canceled from HDNet, where it had resided since 2009. As of now it was set to begin airing on Sinclair Broadcasting's stations in thirty-five different markets nationwide. It will still air in a fraction of the homes that have access to WWE programming.

¹⁹ This information appeared in the March 10, 2010 edition of Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*.

society, he could instead playfully transgress those rules and tell some one that he “Sucked” whenever the mood struck him.

The content of WWE programming encourages this sort of transgressive behavior. One of the most popular performers in the history of WWE is “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, whose character was one of an anti-hero who challenged authority, in most cases his villainous boss Vince McMahon himself. Austin would chug beers and flip off his enemies with his middle finger, a signifier of his subversive character. Another of WWE’s most popular performers, The Rock, was making his return at *WrestleMania*, and he too portrays a character that challenges the rules of society, although his challenge is done via comedy. For example, during one backstage skit at *WrestleMania* that appeared on the numerous large video screens in the Georgia Dome, The Rock confronted an elderly woman named Mae Young. Young was a female wrestler years ago, although now she appears on WWE programming from time to time to perform comedy skits that focus on her advanced age and sexual appetite (which is another societal taboo where a woman is the sexual aggressor and interested in sex in her elder years). During the skit Young stated that she wanted “The People’s Strudel,” a bizarre euphemism for The Rock’s penis. This exchange made some members of the audience laugh, although I am sure not as many as WWE would have envisioned. What I did notice was that most of the people who were laughing were young children, who were presumably not the target audience for the sexual jokes. These children’s enjoyment of this exchange is yet another taboo that WWE was challenging in this skit, subverting the rules of polite society and the dominant class within the context of a stadium show about wrestling.

This section has demonstrated the productive and unproductive instances of resistance that unfold within the wrestling audience. As noted, some of these examples seem to celebrate

acts of resistance, transgressing social norms in the context of a carnivalesque wrestling event. These same examples could be seen as the limits of resistance, such as the smart fan who succeeded in alienating himself from the rest of the wrestling audience. These same debates about resistance recall the work of John Fiske (1989) and its critical reception within the field of audience studies. The recent “Fiske Matters” conference in Madison, Wisconsin reflects the academy’s recent re-embracing of Fiske’s work on the political valence of acts of audience resistance, although there is still some reticence to celebrate acts of resistance too wholeheartedly (Tulloch, 2000). This rhetoric of play brings acts of resistance into the analysis of audience practices, providing a framework that accounts for the critical scholarship on audiences by scholars such as Fiske while simultaneously embracing the criticism of resistance as well.

Play as Identity

Sutton-Smith’s fourth rhetoric of play focuses on how play is used to generate group identities. Sutton-Smith states that, “the rhetorics of identity focus on the use of play forms as forms of bonding, including the exhibition and validation or parody of membership and traditions in a community”(1997, p. 91). The focus is on how play can be used to construct communal ties to a group, as well as how that play can be used to both validate and parody that community. This rhetoric posits play processes as integral components of group identities, establishing ties to a group of people who share both the rules of a particular game or the enjoyment of a shared experience. While forthcoming rhetorics of play take into account one’s individual identity, this rhetoric is centrally concerned with the establishment of something shared by a group of like-minded players.

In order to establish this communal identity, Sutton-Smith argues that there must be a space where these players can come together to share the experience. Sutton-Smith states that, “play is a metaphoric sphere that can conjoin what is otherwise apart and divide what is otherwise together, and in a malleable way use these pretended identities to create a feeling of belonging”(1997, p. 93). The physical space of staged wrestling events is an excellent example of this sphere where audiences come together and put aside their differences to share in a communal experience, although a physical space is not a mandatory component of this play rhetoric. What matters most is the “feeling of belonging,” as this is the primary goal of the shared experience for players within this rhetoric. The establishment of a community, a coherent subculture, is the main focus of play in this rhetoric. There were numerous examples of this communal identity on display during the shows I attended during *WrestleMania* weekend, and this rhetoric of play provides an excellent lens to examine the behaviors exhibited by the wrestling audience at these events. The most blatant examples of this communal identity were found in the style of clothing and costuming I observed at each event, mirroring the utility of subcultural style expressed by Dick Hebdige (1979) in his study of punk subcultures. These groups exhibited a homology where the codes of their subculture were expressly exhibited by their clothing, and these codes were understood by each group of wrestling fans.

Sutton-Smith’s notion of “belonging” was on display most prominently with the shirts worn by members of the wrestling audience during the three shows I attended over *WrestleMania* weekend. Each time I approached the Center Stage venue for the two Ring of Honor shows I saw lines of predominantly male fans garbed in black t-shirts. Many of the shirts that were immediately apparent featured wrestling themes, mostly from the ROH promotion. The ROH shirts, including phrases such as “We Don’t Imitate, We Innovate,” and “ROH

Wrestling: No Limits,” were worn with pride by these male fans, a marker of both subcultural capital and familiarity with this niche promotion within the landscape of the wrestling genre. In addition to many black ROH shirts, I also noticed several t-shirts from other independent wrestling organizations, including Dragon Gate USA (which was also running shows in Atlanta during *WrestleMania* weekend) and Pro Wrestling Guerilla (which is based on the West Coast of the United States). There were also several men in WWE gear, mostly consisting of jerseys for a past year’s *WrestleMania* event or for current WWE wrestlers who had formerly worked for ROH, including talent such as CM Punk and Bryan Danielson (Daniel Bryan in WWE).

The presence of former ROH talent in WWE serves as a source of pride for many fans of ROH. The success in mainstream wrestling of their beloved independent stars seems to validate their own tastes and dedication to independents such as ROH, as if they knew these performers were talented and destined for greatness in the genre. This tension between independent wrestling (exemplified by companies like ROH) and mainstream wrestling (exemplified by Vince McMahon’s WWE) manifests itself within online contexts and fan communities most explicitly. The next chapter will address these issues of validation and betrayal within the spaces of mainstream and independent professional wrestling more comprehensively since it is an ethnography of online wrestling communities, but it is significant to note that of the WWE merchandise spotted in the lines at the ROH shows there was a great discrepancy between WWE stars who had worked for ROH and were represented by the shirts of these fans and homegrown WWE stars with no ROH experience who were virtually invisible within these fans’ wrestling merchandise. These shirts served as markers of subcultural identity for these fans and this wrestling company. Fans wore the shirts to mark their belonging to this subcultural entity, as well as to recognize those wrestlers whose ROH performances they fondly remembered and

respected. And their subcultural identity was more than just fans of ROH, as they were marking their identities as fans of independent wrestling promotions in general rather than just WWE's mainstream product.

The emphasis on WWE t-shirts was apparent in both the numerous merchandise tents spaced around the perimeter of the Georgia Dome and in the apparel worn by those at the event. Given how important shirts were to the identity of wrestling fans at the ROH shows, I paid special attention to what WWE fans were wearing. I expected to see many fans in town for the weekend wearing shirts from either ROH or Dragon Gate USA, since both companies were in town for the weekend and staging events. Over the entire night, I only noticed one shirt for each company, as the majority of apparel worn was WWE-centric. The most popular shirts were those that were currently on sale, as many fans wanted souvenirs from *WrestleMania* and would change into their newly purchased shirts while packing their clothing they wore to the event in their newly purchased WWE tote bag. The most represented WWE performers were John Cena and Randy Orton, who are the two biggest current stars in WWE. Both Orton and Cena are babyfaces (although Cena elicits a decidedly mixed response from wrestling fans), which helps explain why there was so much merchandise for these stars. I also noticed a significant amount of people wearing t-shirts for The Miz, who is a heel in WWE but is also the current WWE champion. These fans seemed to relish that they were wearing the shirt of the heel rather than Cena, who Miz was facing at this event, marking them as subversive or deviant from WWE narratives. This use of t-shirts to express an allegiance to the heel is also reminiscent of Sutton-Smith's previous rhetoric of play as power, as these fans are defiantly supporting the heel in WWE narratives. The Rock and Stone Cold Steve Austin, who were two of WWE's biggest

stars a decade ago, were also making appearances at this year's event, and there were numerous t-shirts worn by fans with their logos or likenesses depicted.

While paying attention to which t-shirts were most represented at *WrestleMania* I noticed a drastic departure from the two ROH events earlier in the weekend. There was a large amount of people walking around with replica championship belts either around their waist or draped across their shoulder. Some fans even had a replica title belt around their waist and on their shoulder simultaneously, parading around the Georgia Dome as if they had to show off their newly won championship. I saw none of these fans wearing replica titles at the ROH shows, and even overheard one small collection of fans lamenting those who think it is a good idea to spend lots of money on a replica title, calling those that do “dumbshits.” At this event, however, there was no shame in wearing these replica titles, as most who did seemed emboldened by their costuming. In particular, those fans with replica titles who were older seemed to have an air of confidence about them, as if they were the world champion and had to play the part of the world champion when before their public. It was an amazing ethnographic moment, noting how reflexive the whole scenario was given that the championship belts in the genre of wrestling are, in fact, props worn by people playing the role of a fighter, and here were fans playing the part of people who play the part of actual fighters.

This focus on costuming, both t-shirts and replica titles, was pushed to its extreme with several fans who created costumes of their favorite wrestlers and wore them to *WrestleMania*. Having a replica title is one thing, but some fans went several steps farther and created whole ensembles that mirrored the costuming seen on television. I noticed two people dressed like The Undertaker, complete with an overcoat and cowboy hat (one had a replica title belt as well). Given that The Undertaker character is that of a “Dead Man,” one of these impersonators wore

makeup around his eyes to give the impression of a skull, mirroring what is seen on WWE television. Other notable costumes included a guy dressed as Hulk Hogan, complete with a body suit of fake muscles to give the impersonator the physique of Hulk Hogan; Roddy Piper, with the impersonator wearing a kilt and asking onlookers if they knew what a Scotsman wears under his kilt (thankfully he did not expose himself in front of those in attendance); Bret Hart, with the impersonator imitating Bret Hart's trademark hand gestures and walk; The Miz, including wearing a Miz t-shirt and wrestling tights; and numerous people in Rey Mysterio masks. This costuming is common at conventions like DragonCon, illustrating the connection between the wrestling audience and other fans of various media content. These impersonations also illustrate play as identity since these fans were marking themselves as belonging to the group identity of the wrestling audience via their costumes. Given they were also playing with their individual identities as both fans and the wrestling characters they impersonated, this sort of play also could fall into the model of play as self, which highlights the fluid and ambiguous nature of the play concept.

Another example of Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of play as identity was when I was making my way inside the giant Georgia Dome for WWE's *WrestleMania*. Like any large stadium event, when you entered the stadium you had to wander up and down various ramps to find the section where your seat was located. What marked this event as distinct from other stadium events was the sounds of "Woohh" that echoed throughout the Georgia Dome as people were making their way around the venue. This exclamation of "Woohh" was a reference to professional wrestler Ric Flair, who would pepper his interviews and matches with a trademark "Woohh" throughout his forty-plus year career. This exclamation has become a sort of call-to-arms for wrestling fans, as any time some one would give a spontaneous "Woohh" others in the

Georgia Dome would respond with their own “Woohh.” This incessant exclamation produced a cacophony that echoed throughout the vast expanses of the cavernous Georgia Dome, as the reverberations of numerous “Woohhs” could be heard as the soundtrack of people wandering to their assigned seats. Even more notable was that Ric Flair, the inspiration for these spontaneous exclamations, was not employed by WWE at this time. He was not going to be present for *WrestleMania* and still fans were “Woohhing” throughout the Georgia Dome. Rather than simply being an homage to Flair, this call was a marker of group belonging. These fans were using Flair’s “Woohh” to mark themselves as members of the wrestling audience.

Although I did not hear any Ric Flair “Woohhs” at the two ROH events, there were instances of these sort of shared calls from members of the audience. The most prominent example of the audience participating in a practice in unison and demonstrating their shared sense of belonging was with their responses to a character known as El Generico. El Generico is a babyface wrestler who faced the heel Michael Elgin on the first ROH show and heel Roderick Strong on the second ROH event of *WrestleMania* weekend. Each match with El Generico featured the audience performing similar routines where they exhibited their sense of belonging to the ROH wrestling audience. The gimmicked persona of El Generico is that he is a “generic luchadore” from Mexico. He wears a cape as he makes his way to the ring and wrestles wearing a mask, the most important part of the luchadore’s identity.²⁰ What is striking about El Generico’s appearance is his pale skin tone and his red beard, which can be seen through his mask’s opening for his mouth. The fans of ROH, being mostly composed of ardent followers of

²⁰ In Mexico luchadores often compete in matches where their masks are on the line, with some of the most prominent stars in the country’s history having never lost their mask and revealed their identity (Mil Mascaras and El Santo being two of the most prominent examples). For more information on Lucha-Libre see Heather Levi’s (2005) *The Mask of the Luchador: Wrestling, Politics, and Identity in Mexico* in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*.

professional wrestling who are knowledgeable of the identities and narratives of the performers outside of wrestling's diegetic universe, are aware that El Generico is not, in fact, from Mexico. He is actually from Canada and plays the character of a Mexican luchadore. Rather than see him as an imposter or heel, the fans appear to revel in his depiction of a lucha-libre star, albeit a generic depiction. The preposterous nature of El Generico's character seems to provide all of the members of the audience with a sense of belonging, that they are all in on the joke together. And as one fan explained to me during El Generico's match on the second evening with Roderick Strong, El Generico consistently has one of the best matches on every show he is on. That El Generico's performance in the ring was so admired almost excused the absurdity of his character for this fan, as he reasoned that it was El Generico's wrestling ability that made him enjoyable.

However, there is more to the performance of El Generico than simply his wrestling ability, as the El Generico character fostered a sense of belonging from the ROH audience via their interactions with him before and during the match. These interactions connected the audience to his character, as well as connected the audience to each other. This connectedness began with El Generico's entrance music, which is the Bouncing Souls song "Olè." The moment this music hit, the fans in Center Stage sang along in unison: "O-lè; Olè, Olè, Olè; O-lè; O-lè." It was quite the scene on both shows, where over seven hundred fans sang along in Spanish for a performer that the majority in attendance knew was not who he pretended to be (not of Latin-American descent). This performance was so inclusive that even fans who had not ever seen an ROH show, like one fan to my right on the second evening, picked up on the ritual very quickly and began singing along with the music for El Generico, belonging to the ROH audience in that moment.

It is important to note that lucha-libre as a national expression of professional wrestling is not the target of the satire, as El Generico's character does not come across as a form of mockery. However, there is a certain clumsiness to both the character and the presence of satire in wrestling, as the genre has an extensive history of ethnic and racial stereotyping, particularly its heel characters. These stereotypes are often accompanied by audiences vociferously jeering the racial or ethnic heels.²¹ El Generico, on the other hand, is often credited by fans of wrestling as being the ultimate babyface performer, as you are able to identify with the character due to his inclusive character and root for him to succeed against his foe. This identification is due to El Generico's rather mundane physique, with little defined musculature and lack of a noticeable tan, as well as his ambiguous ethnic origin, a Mexican luchadore who is from Canada. In addition, the mask is quite nondescript, featuring a black outline with red around his eyes and mouth. Indeed, it could be anyone behind that mask, and this ambiguity accentuates the connection that audiences seem to have with the character. Pushing this connection even further, the fact that the audience feels in on the proverbial joke, knowing that El Generico is not, in fact, from Mexico, allows for the audience to develop an even more enhanced connection to the character, a sort of bond that they are sharing the joke together. That the joke is not aimed at offending any group or ethnicity makes the representation even more palatable for the wrestling audience, as El Generico is not depicted or characterized by any ethnic stereotypes.

The performative nature of the ROH audience continued during the match with El Generico. Whenever El Generico was losing his match to Elgin on the first show or Strong on the second show, the fans would start spontaneously singing his entrance music. One fan would

²¹ Notable examples include WWE's Mohammad Hassan character, who was often associated as a terrorist since he was portrayed as being of Arab descent, and the WWE stable of wrestlers known as the MexiCools, who would ride to the ring on John Deere tractors.

begin by loudly singing “O-lè” and suddenly the majority of the audience in Center Stage would chime in and sing the song, just as they did when El Generico made his entrance. This occurred numerous times, particularly on the second show where El Generico was wrestling Roderick Strong, as Strong would control much of the match. To diegetically give El Generico strength, the audience would start singing the “Olè” song and this would fire El Generico up, only for Roderick Strong to beat him down again. The cycle would then repeat as the two men worked with the wrestling audience to construct a narrative of El Generico being a babyface who was resilient against the heel. In addition, the fans would play along with the absurdity of the El Generico character by adjusting the language of their chants. For example, when a wrestler captures the heel in the corner of the ring and begins punching him in the head, the audience will often count along with each blow, climaxing usually at number ten where the babyface steps back and the heel falls to the mat. This occurred during El Generico’s match with Elgin on the first show, but instead of the audience counting to ten in English, the fans counted along with El Generico’s strikes in Spanish: “Uno, Dos, Tres...” until they reached “Diez” and Elgin collapsed to the mat.

The El Generico character facilitated a sense of belonging to the audience at the two ROH events. The interactions between the performers in the ring and the performers in the audience are best understood within Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of play as identity. Rather than appear as insulting to lucha-libre or Mexican culture, the El Generico character is consistent with a mindset of play, as the fans and performers seem to all share something in the performance. This is not to suggest that the character of El Generico cannot be read as playing up to or exploiting stereotypes. It simply means that for these fans, the use of play as identity was more important to their engagement with the character than in reading him as subversive or

hegemonic. Since play is such an ambiguous concept, however, it also means that within a different rhetoric of play the character of El Generico, as well as the sense of community and belonging that has been identified in this section, are subjective and open to further interpretation.

Play as Imaginary

The fifth rhetoric of play that Sutton-Smith identifies is the rhetoric of play as imaginary. Sutton-Smith describes this rhetoric as the most ambiguous of all the play rhetorics, both because play is such an ambiguous concept itself and because this rhetoric includes how play is used in literature and the arts (1997, p. 149). Sutton-Smith specifically states that within this rhetoric “are all who believe that some kind of transformation is the most fundamental characteristic of play. Not surprisingly, therefore, artists of all kinds are here”(1997, p. 127). This rhetoric uses the world of pretend to describe play, the ability of the imagination to construct experiences for the player. The key is the focus on transformation, the ability of the player to alter his or her state enough to fully immerse oneself into this imaginary plane. There is a transcendent component to this play rhetoric, as players must do what is necessary to transcend their present circumstances and metaphorically enter into this realm of imagination.

This rhetoric provides a context to explore how audiences evaluate texts aesthetically on the basis of how well these texts encourage the suspension of disbelief necessary to enter into this realm of imagination. The phrase “suspension of disbelief” is commonly used by wrestling fans to describe how they are able to enjoy wrestling texts, referring to alternate spaces of their own imagination. To use wrestling terms, this rhetoric explores how the genre of wrestling is

able to facilitate the wrestling audience's "marking out" over a wrestling match, even though these smarks are very much aware that what they are seeing is not, technically, real. The wrestling audience brings with them, as wrestling smarks, the knowledge of wrestling's artificial or scripted nature. And yet these smarks are able to get something aesthetically pleasing from the genre, evidenced by them suspending their disbelief in moments of marking out over what they are seeing in the ring. These marking out moments include knowledgeable fans willfully allowing themselves to enter into these imaginary and metaphorical spaces where, for a brief instant, wrestling is real. If these fans did not suspend disbelief they would cease to be wrestling smarks and instead be the aforementioned smart fan who only engages the genre on the basis of how it is produced. A media equivalent would be like going to a movie with someone who, throughout the whole movie, only discussed its budget, production values, and the lives of the actors who are appearing on the screen.

The suspension of disbelief phrase recalls Roland Barthes' (1975) notion of "jouissance," which refers to the pleasure one obtains from a text. In order to maximize this feeling of jouissance, the audience must lose themselves in the text and completely "suture" (Miller 1966; Heath, 1981) themselves into the text. The concept of suture refers to the gaze or look of the subject and the connection of the subject to the "chain of discourse," focusing on how the subject is stitched into this chain and subsequently binds the subject to the text. It is through this binding between the subject and the text that the subject can experience pleasure in the text, or once again to use wrestling terms, where the subject is able to suspend disbelief enough to mark out over the contents of a wrestling match.

The two ROH shows during *WrestleMania* weekend featured numerous examples of fans marking out over the content in and around the ring since ROH attempts to market directly to

wrestling smarks who are knowledgeable about the wrestling genre. The company pays great attention to little details in order to facilitate the suspension of disbelief necessary for wrestling fans to mark out over scripted matches. This attention to detail was noted on numerous occasions during both ROH events. For example, during a match on the first ROH show between the babyface team of Adam Cole and Kyle O'Reilly against the heel team of Jay and Mark Briscoe I overheard one fan remark that he loved how the heels and babyfaces had separate entranceways. Oftentimes in wrestling the heels and babyfaces make their entrance from the same corridor or doorway, which encourages fans to think of them behind the scenes getting along with each other and talking about their upcoming match. Here, this fan was completely caught up in how ROH attempted to facilitate the illusion of competition by keeping their heels and babyfaces separate. For him, this detail allowed him to imagine that if the heels and babyfaces in ROH were in close proximity with each other then there would be a backstage altercation. Basically, this fan could pretend that the babyfaces and heels really did not like each other, making their actions in the ring seem more authentic. He knew that they were, in fact, all working together to provide the illusion of a heated battle, but by adding this layer of detail he could momentarily forget that during the match and mark out for the action in the ring.

Entrances were also significant components of WWE's *WrestleMania*. In fact, the entrances were even more important to WWE's event than the two ROH shows. It was during the entrances of each WWE performer that I noticed the eyes in the crowd were most focused on the spectacle of *WrestleMania*, whether it was the stage where the performer appeared for the first time or the ring where the WWE performer would often pose before the crowd prior to beginning the match. Once the matches started, there were many fans who turned to their friends and family and began conversations about the show rather than focused on the match, which was

not as frequent an occurrence at the two ROH events. In fact, they were almost completely inverted, as the ROH fans focused more on the actual matches than the entrances and in WWE the fans were more tuned into the elaborate entrances of the WWE stars than the matches, especially considering how far away the ring was in the Georgia Dome from our seats. As we will see in the next chapter, this distinction between what each audience values at wrestling events reveals the aesthetic principles of each wrestling audience's conception of an ideal wrestling promotion.

The marking out moments at *WrestleMania* often occurred during the entrances of the performers. While the ROH fans appreciated the small details to foster their suspension of disbelief, WWE and its fans seemed focused on the spectacle. For example, the entrances for John Cena and The Miz, who were in the main event of the show, were both extravagant and engaging. Before each made his entrance there was a video that played on the screens around the Georgia Dome. The video for The Miz featured an audio track of him talking about his beginnings in WWE, when he was ostracized by much of the roster for being a former star of reality television.²² After the video played, The Miz made his grand entrance amidst giant inflatable letters that spelled out his catchphrase of “Awesome.” As opposed to the ROH shows where smart fans were marking out over the little details and becoming smarks, the smart fan seated next to me at *WrestleMania* complained that it was “bullshit” that the champion (The Miz) was making his entrance first, referring to the tradition in genres such as wrestling and MMA where the champion makes his entrance after the challenger has been introduced.

After The Miz made his entrance a video began for John Cena, eliciting a buzz of cheers and jeers from the crowd in attendance. The video featured photos of Cena as a youth,

²² The Miz began his career as Mike Mizanin on MTV's *Real World* prior to entering WWE.

discussing his dream of being in WWE. After the video concluded a gospel choir began singing gorgeous music, and with the lights dimmed it was truly an odd yet beautiful moment at this wrestling event. With the choir hitting higher and higher notes amidst the flashes of cameras from the crowd, it finally hit a crescendo and John Cena's entrance music began to play. Cena's music is his own hip hop song with a very catchy hook that doesn't sound like any other entrance theme used in WWE, which makes it stand out. With the unmistakable (for wrestling fans) music replacing the gospel choir there was a surge of cheers that was quickly drowned out by the sounds of adult male voices vociferously booing Cena.²³ This juxtaposition was dramatic, as the cheers of the fans were perfectly timed to the introduction of his theme song, and as the song moves beyond its opening notes the cheers are replaced by a lower rumble of male consternation. There was more interest in these entrances than in their match, at least until The Rock made his entrance into the main event.

The entrances were only a minor detail at the ROH shows, as the most significant component of the two ROH events was the wrestling matches. These fans seemed wholly focused on how well the matches went, rather than who would win the scripted match. It is an interesting departure from traditional sports fans, as most sports fans focus on the competitive aspect of the game and rely heavily on the games' outcome. At these wrestling events, on the other hand, the ROH fans instead focused on how well the matches/games were performed. Starting with the opening match of the very first ROH show during *WrestleMania* weekend, the fans of ROH would immediately begin discussing how many "stars" a match deserved once it was completed, referring to the five-star scale popularly used by wrestling journalists and

²³ John Cena is a confounding character in WWE where young children and women cheer him and male fans (predominantly) boo him. The result is always a great atmosphere of fans battling with their cheers and jeers over the reception of the Cena character.

websites that cover the genre. These fans would discuss the minutia of the match, arguing over whether a match deserved three-and-a-half stars or three-and-three-quarter stars, for example. I overheard numerous reasons for adding or deducting stars to a match, including how crisp they performed their wrestling maneuvers, whether the focus of a wrestler's attack led to the finish of the match, and whether a wrestler was properly "selling" the effects of the damage he incurred during the match. Ultimately, these evaluative criteria represent how well these wrestlers were able to make the audience suspend their disbelief during the match and mark out over the action in the ring. This behavior was highlighted by a small group of fans who had printed out a list of matches for each event during *WrestleMania* weekend on pieces of paper where they would insert their own star ratings for each match. These pieces of paper were literally evidence of the media smirk – as these fans cheered the matches and jeered the villains like the contest was real while simultaneously examining each match on its ability to convey a simulated athletic contest that provided the illusion of competition and combat.

Another phenomenon performed by the wrestling audience at the two ROH shows featured the fans in attendance showering the performers with thanks during certain matches. One fan described this phenomenon as "Go Home Applause," meaning that the fans gave permission to the wrestlers to end the match by cheering for the wrestlers' performance near the end of a lengthy match. For example, the main event of the first ROH show during *WrestleMania* weekend featured ROH champion Eddie Edwards defending his title against veteran wrestler Christopher Daniels. Daniels was slowly turning heel at this time, getting frustrated with his inability to defeat babyface Edwards for the ROH title.²⁴ The match between

²⁴ This heel turn was cemented at the conclusion of the match when Daniels refused to shake the hand of Edwards. One fan familiar with ROH since the company's inception in 2002 stated it

Edwards and Daniels went a long time, over thirty minutes, and during the match fans would chant for both performers (Daniels still had many fans since he has had such a distinguished career in wrestling and was still in the process of turning heel). These chants included, for example, a “Let’s Go Daniels” chant immediately followed by others chanting, “Let’s Go Edwards.” In addition, each time the wrestlers exchanged strikes the audience would yell “Yay” while others would yell “Boo,” creating a cacophony with each side trying to drown out the other. However, near the end of the match, both men were lying on their backs, exhausted from the match and selling the effects of their battle for the audience. At this point the entire venue stood up and began applauding both men, followed by the audience chanting the name of the promotion over and over: “R-O-H; R-O-H.” This go-home applause signaled the audience was appreciative of the performance of these wrestlers, as well as the event as a whole. They had enjoyed marking out over the match, and at this stage in the night they were telling the entire company of their satisfaction.

There were no instances of go-home applause at WWE’s *WrestleMania*, but there was a moment where it seemed the entire stadium marked out during a match. The match was the aforementioned contest between Triple H and The Undertaker, with Triple H trying to snap the undefeated streak of The Undertaker at *WrestleMania*. The match itself started quite fast, as they brawled around the ring very early on. Dave Meltzer had reported that both men were limited by physical maladies, particularly The Undertaker who was returning from a shoulder injury early to take part in *WrestleMania* (2011). Because of these limitations, it was assumed that they would resort to tricks such as brawling out of the ring and the use of weapons to mask the physical limitations these men had. However, this brawling outside of the ring seemed to excite the

was just like the very first ROH show where Daniels refused to shake the hands of his opponents, subsequently positioning him as the top villain in the promotion.

crowd, as many fans were engrossed in the match early on. After the crowd brawling to start both men started to hit their signature maneuvers. Each time one man hit his signature maneuver the other would escape the pinfall attempt at the last moment, eliciting “Oohhs” from the crowd and chants supporting either Triple H or The Undertaker. Many in the crowd were into each finisher, cheering like this would surely be the conclusion of the match and then acting surprised when they would kick out. However, there was also some in our section who complained about how the match was unfolding. For example, the smart fan next to me stated that this match, “was simply finisher, kickout, rest, repeat.” Indeed, these men spent a lot of time laying on the mat between each signature maneuver. In all, the match lasted over thirty minutes, and one fan argued that they could have cut ten minutes from that match with all of the laying around that these men did. At the same time, this match garnered the most reaction from the crowd of any other match at *WrestleMania*, and many were clearly enjoying the match. One spot in particular garnered a tremendous reaction, as Triple H used The Undertaker’s signature maneuver on The Undertaker. In this instance even the fans who were arguing that there was no way that Triple H would win this match and end The Undertaker’s streak a half hour earlier were acting shocked that The Undertaker kicked out of Triple H’s pinfall attempt. After this maneuver, Triple H backed away from The Undertaker’s body, communicating that he was acting “scared” of the determination of his opponent. Even the smart fan to my right raved about that detail, finally marking out and behaving like a smark rather than the smart fan.

Earlier in the match, which was promoted as a “No Disqualification” match, Triple H had brought a sledgehammer (which for years was the weapon of choice for the Triple H character when he would ambush his opponents outside of the ring) into the ring to use against The Undertaker, which would not be allowed within the rules of a normal wrestling match but was

within the horizon of expectations of a “No Disqualification” match. This use of brawling and weaponry during the match was an attempt to hide the physical limitations of each performer, as both were over forty years old and past their athletic primes, as well as veteran performers with years of wear on their bodies from previous matches. In the end The Undertaker managed to capture Triple H in a submission maneuver and Triple H reached for his weapon to escape. At the last moment, however, Triple H dropped his weapon and was left with no choice but to submit. The fans were screaming for him to “Tap” while he was trapped in the submission hold, referencing the practice of wrestlers and MMA fighters signaling that they give up by tapping their hands on their opponent or the mat so the referee can stop the match. Others in the crowd were begging him not to tap and when he reached his weapon, a sledgehammer, they were screaming that he has the hammer. When Triple H dropped the hammer and had to submit, many in the crowd were narrating the match, yelling that “He Dropped It” when it was clearly visible on the huge video screens (if not the ring that was so far away). In this moment many of the fans were marking out, caught up in the spectacle where it did not matter whether what they were seeing was real or “fake.” Instead, even the smart fans were smarks who were hinging on whether Triple H would be able to resist The Undertaker. After the match, there was some consternation amongst many who argued that while the match was good it was not a classic, arguing that it deserved “between three-and-a-half stars and four stars.” Others argued that it was one of the best matches they had ever seen, saying it was “four-and-a-half stars or higher.”

Members of the wrestling audience play with more than just the matches and entrances, however. These fans also mark out over the characters portrayed by the performers. The genre of wrestling complicates this notion of character performance since many of the wrestlers claim that their wrestling characters incorporate aspects of their real-life personality, only amplified

(Matysik, 2009). The wrestling audience evaluates how well the wrestler performs his or her character, and this performance transcends babyface or heel affiliation. These fans can appreciate the performance of a heel, even if they boo the heel in the context of wrestling's diegesis. For example, during the ROH events, several heel characters were jeered by fans who had previously stated how much they admired the heels' portrayal of their character. One character, in particular, who faced the wrath of the ROH fans was Prince Nana. Prince Nana leads a heel faction of wrestlers in ROH known as "The Embassy" and often uses underhanded tactics to help his wrestlers cheat their way to victory. One fan expressed to me that he felt that Prince Nana was the best heel manager in all of wrestling at this moment. He then stood from his seat and yelled out, "Nana You Suck."

A more complex example from the first ROH event occurred during a match between Jay and Mark Briscoe and Adam Cole and Kyle O'Reilly. The Briscoes had recently turned heel and have a long history in ROH, while Cole and O'Reilly were the young babyface team looking to rise up the ranks of the company. The crowd was torn here as many knew they should boo Jay and Mark Briscoe since they had just turned heel but at the same time many really liked this team and cheered them anyway. When the Briscoes were on offense the fans would have dueling chants where some would boo while others chanted "Man Up" with each maneuver, which was the Briscoe brothers' catchphrase when they were babyfaces. The Briscoes won the tag team match and the fans were on their feet at the conclusion of the match, most of them booing the result. It was not that the fans disliked the match. Instead, they seemed to like the match so much they got caught up in the roles they were playing and booed the heels since it was such a fun contest. This juxtaposition of approval via the audience rising to their feet and jeering with their voices exemplifies the complex behaviors of this audience, as these fans' boos must be

interpreted as positive feedback in the context of the match where the goal was for the Briscoe brothers to get over as heels. In addition, one fan remarked to me as the fans were then cheering the defeated Cole and O'Reilly that these two guys, "Got over in losing, which is ridiculously hard." This fan was explaining the complex processes and behaviors of the wrestling audience, focusing on how these fans were giving the losers vociferous positive feedback, not for losing, but for having such a fun match.

It is fascinating how different the evaluative criteria is between the more knowledgeable wrestling audience at the ROH shows and the casual wrestling audience at *WrestleMania*. More accurately, the more homogenous audience at the ROH shows seemed to privilege the performance of the wrestlers while the WWE's more heterogeneous audience found value in a variety of components of the performance. The most egregious difference in these two audiences' ability to mark out was in the preponderance of children at the WWE event. The kids' marking out moments had much more to do with the outcomes of matches, rather than the performance of the match. In this way these children behaved much more like wrestling marks rather than smarks. For example, prior to the pay-per-view event beginning, there was a match between heel wrestler Sheamus and babyface wrestler Daniel Bryan. This match turned into a battle royal, which is a type of match where a great number of wrestlers compete against each other and eliminate their opponents by tossing them over the top rope and to the floor. The goal of this sort of match at *WrestleMania* is usually for those in WWE who do not have a match at the biggest show of the year to have a chance to appear before the large crowd and earn some pay for working the event (Alvarez, 2011). During the match I commented that I enjoyed the work of William Regal, a heel wrestler in the match. This flabbergasted some children sitting near me, as they seemed genuinely taken aback by my admiration for Regal. I stated that I

admired his ability to wrestle matches that appeared realistic, and their response was that, “he always loses.” This exchange clearly positions these children as quintessential wrestling marks. However, they also seemed to enjoy teasing anyone who disagreed with them, playing along as the voice of their heroes as the drama in the ring at the Georgia Dome occurred a great distance away from us.

The differences and similarities outlined in this section clearly illustrate the ability of the wrestling audience to mark out for various components of the wrestling genre. These varied behaviors clearly fit into the rhetoric of play as imaginary, although just like previous examples they can also be interpreted within the other rhetorics as well. The differences between ROH and WWE will be more pronounced in the next chapter, as it focuses fully on how the online wrestling audiences employ various evaluative criteria to assign value to each iteration of wrestling. However, the behaviors outlined here clearly illustrate a desire of wrestling fans, and by extension all who engage media texts, to suspend disbelief and momentarily use their imagination when they are playing. This rhetoric allows us to examine these behaviors in an aesthetic sense, focusing on how well the texts are able to facilitate this suspension of disbelief in order for audiences to fully use their imaginative potential.

Play as Self

The sixth rhetoric of play that Sutton-Smith identifies is the rhetoric of play as self. This rhetoric positions the focus of play on the experience of the individual player and the quality of that experience for the individual. Sutton-Smith states that, “like the rhetorics of the imaginary, the self rhetoric is more concerned with individuals than with groups”(1997, p. 174). In fact, this

rhetoric is almost the inverse of the rhetoric of play as identity, as rather than focusing on how play can facilitate a sense of belonging to a specific group or entity, this rhetoric focuses on how play can help an individual stand out from a group. This focus on the individual experience, as Sutton-Smith argues, is the outcome of the “individualization” of human life that has dominated Western culture for the past five hundred years (1997, p. 175). Play becomes a means for individuals to stand out from the mass, to excel and achieve within a specific cultural context. In this way play functions in a similar manner to Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of cultural capital, as players can acquire status and rise to a position of power within the group’s hierarchy. Within this rhetoric play is also about experimenting with different subject positions, as the safe space of the wrestling audience allows for members to assume the roles of heels and babyfaces themselves.

Play is not only about this accumulation of cultural capital, or to be more accurate with the wrestling audience, subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996). In this section we shall see how members of the wrestling audience at both the ROH and WWE events attempt to stand out from the crowd as individuals, as well as how these individuals attempt to conspicuously demonstrate their accumulated knowledge within their subculture. In addition, we shall also see how the individual experience of the player, what this rhetoric of the self is based on, manifests itself outside of the realm of subcultural capital. Instead of solely focusing on the acquisition of subcultural capital, many players in the wrestling audience experiment with aspects of their own identity, relishing the freedom to experiment this space provides. This section will conclude with examples of the wrestling audience taking pleasure in standing out and experimenting with various aspects of their personality, enjoying the experience of playing with their individual identity even if it provides little opportunity for subcultural capital accumulation.

Carl Jung's (1964) theory of "individuation" provides a useful lens to examine this form of play. Individuation refers to the process of integrating all aspects of an individual's personality, which for Jung correspond to life cycles and include the Ego, Persona, Shadow, Anima (men) and Animus (women). Of particular importance to this analysis is Jung's concept of the Shadow, which is described as all of the socially unacceptable portions of our personality (Stevens, 1994). The Shadow is relegated to the unconscious and is the unwanted part of our personality that we take with us wherever we go, and in the context of a Jungian analysis the patient must confront his or her Shadow to come to terms with these repugnant qualities. What we find in the wrestling audience is an opportunity to engage the Shadow portion of our personality, to bring it to the forefront and publicly present it to others as a heel. This opportunity is prohibited in everyday life, but at these wrestling events fans are able to engage the Shadow side of their personality, trying out aspects of their own self that are normally buried or hidden. For these fans, there appears to be something fun about having the safe space to engage their Jungian Shadow.

The most obvious way that the wrestling audience attempted to stand out from the masses at these wrestling events was by starting chants. At each event, fans would attempt to start chants to stand out from those around them, whether it was to lead the others or to short circuit what was already being chanted by the masses in attendance. Given the small size of the Center Stage venue where the ROH shows were held, it was much easier for fans to start their chants and be heard by others. Many in the crowd would attempt to yell out something witty, screaming loudly and in rhythm in an attempt to get the other fans in the venue to chant along with them. For example, during the aforementioned match between El Generico and Michael Elgin, there was one fan who took the opportunity to stand out from the others there by starting a

chant of “Rogaine” directed at Elgin. Elgin is a heel wrestler with a stocky frame and a noticeable bald spot on the top of his head. Near the beginning of the match this fan began to chant “Rogaine” at Elgin. Others in the audience found this witty, as several in my section laughed at the fan and looked back at him before joining into his chants. Further, this chant generated a reaction from Elgin himself, as he would glare in the direction of the fan who started the chant and seemed to “sell” his frustration with the fans’ mocking of him.

The ROH fans often get a reputation from wrestling fans online for “trying to get themselves over” with their witty chants.²⁵ Given the small size of the venues that ROH often holds its events in, it is easy to understand how this occurs, as it is much easier to get one’s voice heard in an space that seats seven hundred fans as opposed to seventy thousand fans. WWE events, on the other hand, usually occur in arenas that seat several thousand fans, and stadiums like the Georgia Dome for *WrestleMania* make getting your individual voice heard nearly impossible. While I did not see many examples of an individual’s voice rising above the crowd in the Georgia Dome, what did happen was for many pockets of fans to challenge the chants of the masses and provide an alternative voice to the wrestling audience. For example, during the main event between John Cena and The Miz, the fans were expected to cheer for Cena and jeer The Miz since Cena was the babyface and Miz was the heel. In the case of both wrestlers, however, there were many fans who challenged the chants that were echoing around the Georgia Dome. When Cena was on offense in the match, most of the fans, and more specifically most of the women and kids in the audience, would chant, “Let’s-Go-Cena.” You could also hear, right as that chant ended and in the background, a noticeably male chant of “Cena-Sucks.” When

²⁵ For example, see Ari Berenstein’s Column of Honor entitled “The Double Standard and Hypocrisy of Certain ROH Fans.” <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/66375/Column-of-Honor-Special-Edition:-01.05.08:-The-Double-Standard-and-Hypocrisy-of-Certain-ROH-Fans.htm>

taken together as one line of dialogue it sounded like a chant of, “Let’s-Go-Cena-Cena-Sucks,” although with different voices and decibel levels for the phrase. Similarly, The Miz was mostly jeered by the fans and was heralded with chants of, “Miz-Is-Awful.” Those chants were followed by a noticeably smaller group audibly chanting, “Miz-Is-Awesome.” The result mirrored the Cena example with long chants of, “Miz-Is-Awful-Miz-Is-Awesome.” In each case the result was a smaller group of fans trying to stand out from the wrestling audience and make their voices heard in the Georgia Dome.

Another way that WWE fans attempted to single themselves out from the crowd was by making signs. At WWE events the fans often bring with them cardboard signs to hold up for the cameras. This allows them to both show their support for their favorite performers (by holding up a sign that has their favorite wrestler’s name on it) and make themselves visible on television. Their sign becomes something to look for when they watch the show later on or for their friends and family to look for so that they can see them in the crowd. These fans also often try to make their signs witty, mirroring what was done audibly at the ROH shows. For example, one sign I noted had a drawing of a character named “King Hippo” from the Nintendo Entertainment System game *Mike Tyson’s Punch Out*. When I asked him why, he said it was an homage to current WWE wrestler Brodus Clay, whose body type is indeed reminiscent of the famous 1980s video game character. This fan got to show off his drawing skills and use an obscure reference with his sign at *WrestleMania*, standing out from the rest of the fans in attendance and demonstrating his subcultural capital in both wrestling and video gaming. Even more fascinating was that his sign, as well as many others in our section, had no hope of making it on camera since we were so far away from the ring and stage in the cavernous Georgia Dome. This eliminated a key reason for fans to make signs to bring to WWE events, and yet there were still

numerous people in our section who held their signs high when their favorite wrestlers made their entrances at *WrestleMania*.

The most powerful example of a fan using a sign to show an allegiance to a certain wrestler or performer was one young girl who was around ten years old. She made her presence felt during a match between the babyface team of John Morrison, Trish Stratus, and the debuting “Snooki” from the popular MTV program *Jersey Shore* against the heel team of Dolph Ziggler, Michele McCool, and Layla El. The presence of Snooki was designed to get WWE some attention from the entertainment press for their event, even though many in the audience were hostile to the presence of this MTV personality on their wrestling event. When Snooki made her entrance there were considerable jeers from those in my section, with one fan in particular who was dressed in a Stone Cold Steve Austin t-shirt vociferously cursing her from afar as she made her way to the ring. The aforementioned young girl held her homemade cardboard sign with the word “Snooki” written in marker. This fan stood in silence, holding her lone supportive sign amidst the chorus of boos that were raining down from those surrounding her. Clearly this fan was familiar with both Snooki from her MTV program and the protocol of wrestling fans, as she brought her homemade sign to show her support for a particular character. In this instant she separated herself from the wrestling audience, making herself distinct in supporting Snooki despite the hostility surrounding her.

The signs at WWE’s *WrestleMania* represent a stark difference from the wrestling audience at the ROH shows. The two ROH events were internet pay-per-views, meaning that they were aired on the website GoFightLive.com and fans could log onto that site and pay a fee to see the events as they happened in Atlanta. Even though the two shows were airing on internet pay-per-view and were being taped for DVD release (as all ROH events are), there were

no signs present at either show that I noticed. In fact, one fan explained to me that it was considered rude to bring a sign to a ROH event, as the presence of the sign may obstruct the view of others in the venue who are watching the matches. This is a stark contrast to WWE, where many of the fans brought signs and the content of those signs were sources of pride for many of the fans.

At all events during the weekend, members of the wrestling audience attempted to demonstrate their accumulation of subcultural capital within the wrestling genre. I noted numerous instances of fans at both ROH shows exhibiting their knowledge of ROH to others, showing off that they were extraordinarily familiar with both ROH and wrestling as a whole. For example, when Christopher Daniels refused to shake the hand of Eddie Edwards following the main event of the ROH show on Friday evening, one fan began to talk extensively to his friends about how this echoed Daniels' actions at the very first ROH event in 2002. This fan was certainly being helpful to others around him, providing some additional context to the narrative unfolding in the ring so that others may enjoy it more fully. At the same time, this fan was also clearly relishing this demonstration of knowledge, enjoying being able to lecture his friends about the history of ROH and for being astute enough to notice subtle nods to the company and character's history. This exchange was clearly a demonstration of subcultural capital, as it prompted his friend to ask a follow-up question about Daniels' early tenure in ROH from 2002. The knowledgeable fan became a respected member of this subcultural community in this instant, sharing his knowledge with others who looked to him for information.

The fans at the ROH shows also exhibited wrestling knowledge outside of just ROH. For example, during a match between the Kings of Wrestling, who were comprised of heel wrestlers Chris Hero and Claudio Castagnoli, and Wrestling's Greatest Tag Team, who were former WWE

wrestlers Charlie Haas and Shelton Benjamin, I overheard two fans talking at length about the career of Chris Hero. The discussion revolved around whether Hero has had a better ROH career than former ROH performer and current WWE star CM Punk. Punk and Hero are a notable comparison as they also had matches on the independent wrestling scene many years ago outside of Ring of Honor, including one where CM Punk fractured his skull in the match. These two fans talked at great length, comparing matches that Punk had in ROH between 2002 and 2005 to matches that Hero has had in ROH since 2006. One fan would suggest that Hero has had a better body of work overall than Punk given his number of years in ROH, while his friend argued that Hero had never had a single match as good as one from 2004 between CM Punk and former ROH wrestler Samoa Joe. The comparison of the minutia of ROH history, as well as discussion of wrestling matches outside of just Ring of Honor and WWE between Punk and Hero, demonstrate that these two fans were extraordinarily knowledgeable about the genre of wrestling. And they also seemed to enjoy demonstrating this knowledge, as they were talking loudly enough that those around them would keep looking toward them during their conversation, especially when it appeared that a fan was being swayed by a particular argument these two were making.

The ROH crowd is known for being knowledgeable about wrestling since the company's product is not readily available on television. ROH fans have to seek it out, finding the company online and purchasing DVDs of the events (or pirating the events via torrent sites). WWE fans, on the other hand, could be considered more casual fans since they presumably have easy access to WWE content via cable stations like USA and SyFy, which are in millions of people's homes in the United States. In addition, there are many more kids in the WWE audience than in the ROH audience, and these children are presumably not as knowledgeable about the wrestling

genre as adult fans who have followed it for many years. However, even the kids in the WWE audience relish their ability to demonstrate subcultural capital, showing off their knowledge of WWE performers and narratives to others. For example, during the battle royal before the *WrestleMania* pay-per-view broadcast began, there were a few kids seated in front of me who were providing information about the characters in the match. Given where our seats were, I found it difficult to see what was happening in the match. These kids began giving me updates on who was eliminated and who was left as the match progressed. They also knew every performer in the match, and their parents seemed proud of their children's demonstration of knowledge during this match.

An even more pronounced example of these kids demonstrating their subcultural capital and standing out from the crowd in the WWE audience was during a match between the heel team of The Corre (WWE purposefully misspells the name of this group, presumably for copyright over the intellectual property) against a babyface team consisting of Kane, The Big Show, Santino Marella, and Kofi Kingston. Kingston was replacing another babyface wrestler named Vladimir Kozlov, who had been advertised for the match. During the week leading up to the match, Kozlov was "injured" by a sneak attack from The Corre at a WWE event in Atlanta known as Fan Axxess. During this event, which was not televised, Kozlov was attacked and taken out of the match, which wrestling journalists Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez implied was because Kozlov was not a very good wrestler. A family sitting near me remarked that they were at the event where Kozlov was "injured" and relayed their story to all within earshot, giving this "insider information" to fans who were not there. They were clearly relishing the opportunity to be in the know, showing off their subcultural capital.

The previous examples clearly depict members of the wrestling audience trying to stand out from the group, either through acting oppositional or in a leadership capacity, or through their demonstration of accumulated subcultural capital. However, this rhetoric of play also focuses on the pleasure generated by the play experience. The pleasure is that of the individual who plays with his or her own identity, acting in a way that is meant to ensure and maximize the pleasure of the play experience. Through this play, the individual is able to engage the Jungian Shadow side of his or her personality, allowing parts of their personality to surface that are normally hidden from view. The accumulation of subcultural capital, if it even happens, is merely a byproduct in such an instance, as the focus is simply on the individual's opportunity to engage their Shadow. The most pronounced example of this sort of identity play as self was while I was waiting to enter Center Stage for the Friday ROH event. I met a fan from Arizona while waiting in line to enter the venue who talked openly about his trip and his excitement for the ROH show that evening, which was going to be his first live ROH experience. I turned from him very briefly, only to look back toward him and to continue our conversation and he had donned a lucha-libre mask of the La Parka character. Now this fan, who was so friendly and excited a moment ago, was "in character." He was behaving much more menacingly, saying little and glaring at people passing by. Only a moment earlier he was humbly talking about how nervous he was traveling from Arizona to Georgia on his own, and now he was acting presumably like the real La Parka would act if he were standing there. More importantly, this fan was allowing his Shadow to manifest itself in the guise of wrestler La Parka, as he could behave like the masked wrestling character in a public setting while waiting to attend the show. Clearly this fan was playing with his own identity, as he was acting completely different from his unmasked self. In this moment he was not two different people, but instead both of these

characters and each of these characters depending on the social context. He was his Jungian Persona and Shadow, allowing each portion of his individuated self to manifest itself prior to this ROH event. He clearly was intent on enjoying this opportunity to play with his individual identity, maximizing his ROH experience by donning the La Parka mask and adopting the La Parka identity.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed some WWE fans dressing as current and former WWE wrestlers, an example that could clearly fit within this play rhetoric as well. I included it in the rhetoric of play as identity since in many ways these costumes marked them as members of a larger wrestling audience of WWE fans, especially considering the characters they dressed like were some of the biggest stars in WWE's past (Roddy Piper, Bret Hart) and present (The Miz, The Undertaker). One way that WWE fans did play with their individual identities was by acting like heels themselves during *WrestleMania*. In particular, CM Punk elicited a strong response of fans who loathed his character and fans who seemed to relish his presence in WWE. As he made his way down the long ramp to the ring, most in attendance were loudly booing him or sitting in their seats with their thumbs down in silent protest. However, looking around the Georgia Dome, I spotted several ardent supporters of CM Punk. I noted that those fans who were cheering him were also encouraging others to stand up and cheer despite their protests. These fans would raise their arms in an upward motion to solicit more of a response from those jeering CM Punk, almost as if they were the heels who were soaking in the jeers of the audience. They were even encouraging these fans to boo further, playing the role of the villain to generate more "heat" for the CM Punk heel character in the ring.

This rhetoric of play as self posits several motivations for an individual to stand out from those in the group. The assumption is that this individualization is the pleasure itself in play, that

standing out is what is pleasurable about playing. Although there were certainly differences in how this rhetoric of play manifests itself within the fans present at the ROH and WWE events, the ultimate result is that wrestling fans seem to want to stand out from the wrestling audience. And as we saw with the rhetoric of play as identity, there is an equal desire to be part of this wrestling audience. Yet again play has allowed us to transcend these seemingly irreconcilable binaries – of belonging to the mass and of being separate from the mass. This ability to transcend binary categories explains how wrestling fans can behave in seemingly contradictory ways that disrupt previous conceptions of media audiences.

Play as Frivolity

Sutton-Smith's final rhetoric of play is the rhetoric of play as being frivolous or frivolity. For Sutton-Smith, the other six rhetorics are based on a reaction to this Puritanical "common sense" rhetoric, which posits play as something trivial or wasteful. Sutton-Smith states that, "the Puritan ethic of play has been the strongest and most long lasting of all the rhetorics of play in the past four hundred years. It is the antithesis to all the other rhetorics. None of their assertions makes much sense unless seen as a denial of the preposition that play is essentially useless" (1997, p. 201). The Puritan work ethic positions play as an improper use of time, as one could and should be productive and work, rather than wasteful and unproductive by playing. But implicit within each of the six previous rhetorics is the refutation that play does, in fact, matter - that play is not a waste of time or frivolous. And even if play can be frivolous, that this frivolity is not a bad thing, perhaps even useful. Ultimately, imagining play as frivolous provides an opportunity to celebrate frivolity as something significant or important.

The wrestling audience exhibited numerous examples of this play rhetoric during *WrestleMania* weekend. For fans of both ROH and WWE, the experience of attending the events of *WrestleMania* weekend was both frivolous and useful. Many were not working, being frivolous with their time and taking a break from their jobs or normal lives to enjoy these wrestling events.²⁶ That break did not make these experiences useless, however. In fact, I met numerous people who attested to the importance of the events during *WrestleMania* weekend at each of the shows I attended. These fans pointed to the experience itself of going to these wrestling events as an example that refutes the rhetoric of play as frivolity. In addition, the way that these fans determine value in each wrestling company illustrates the importance of play for these members of the wrestling audience. Finally, how the wrestling companies themselves conceptualize value represents another way that these events are not pure frivolity. This notion of value will be explored in more depth in the next chapter of this project.

In addition to members of the wrestling audience taking pleasure from the experience of attending *WrestleMania* weekend, the ways that the wrestling audience assigns value to wrestling content demonstrates that for them, wrestling is not just frivolity. More specifically, many in the wrestling audience at the ROH shows explicitly critiqued WWE's version of professional wrestling, as there was considerable consternation from these fans over how WWE deemphasizes the wrestling matches in favor of longer interviews, comedy sketches, and elaborate pyrotechnic displays. As we will see in the next chapter, WWE goes to great lengths to distance themselves from the negative connotations of wrestling, even though it is not a shameful

²⁶ There were exceptions to this, however. For example, I met Bryan Alvarez at the two ROH shows. Alvarez is a wrestling journalist who covers the wrestling industry and the world of Mixed-Martial-Arts for a living by running the Figure Four Online website and publishing the *Figure Four Weekly* Newsletter. Although Alvarez seemed to be having a good time at these events, he was also covering them for his job like I was.

term to many in the wrestling audience. The most pronounced example of this connection of value to wrestling content from the two ROH shows occurred during a match on the first night between Davey Richards and Roderick Strong. The match itself was very long and athletic, with each man performing wrestling maneuvers that tested their endurance. In addition, these wrestlers seemed so determined to make their match appear authentic that they connected with numerous strikes that sent echoes of contact throughout the Center Stage venue. Wrestling may be fake, but these two men seemed determined to make the audience forget this fact and mark out over the punishment they delivered to their opponent. Near the climax of the match, after each man had endured extraordinary punishment and was on the verge of exhaustion, the crowd began to rise and spontaneously chant, “This-Is-Wrestling (Clap; Clap; Clap, Clap, Clap).” In this moment, the wrestling audience was showering these men with adulation, appreciating the effort they put forth in the match by providing a declaratory chant. All of these wrestling fans had come to Atlanta for WWE’s *WrestleMania*, and on this night the fans in Center Stage boldly stated that to them, this encapsulated what they loved about the wrestling genre and rejected WWE’s apology for being associated with wrestling.

This chant had even more resonance due to recent happenings within WWE. During the week leading up to *WrestleMania*, WWE had taken the magazine *TV Week* to task for calling their product “wrestling.” They claimed they were no longer a wrestling company and instead were an “entertainment” company, demanding that the author remove the stigma of wrestling from his article (Alvarez, 2011). WWE’s presumed embarrassment from being labeled as wrestling was being rebuked by these passionate fans at Center Stage on this evening. Instead of being embarrassed by wrestling and refusing to identify with the genre, these fans were proudly labeling what they were seeing by yelling out that “This Is Wrestling.” What is significant here

was how these fans were both proud and defiant with this chant, with the performers in the ring embodying the genre within echoes of these powerful words. To these fans, wrestling was not associated with frivolity. Wrestling mattered to these fans, and it mattered a great deal. In a week when the leading company, WWE, dissociated itself from the term, these fans and performers embraced it and made it mean everything to them.

However, this rejection of wrestling as frivolity is not a uniform practice by the wrestling audience, as many embrace frivolity within the genre. Several fans I spoke with at *WrestleMania* expressed a critique often heard within the IWC regarding ROH and its fans as being too serious. For many fans of wrestling, there is not enough frivolity in ROH and that lack of frivolity makes their shows “hard to watch.” This embracing of frivolity is common within the wrestling audience, as it represents a camp sensibility where, as Susan Sontag (1964) expressed, “one can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.” For example, there is a website known as “WrestleCrap” that celebrates the more ludicrous, ridiculous moments in wrestling history.²⁷ Notable inductions into the WrestleCrap include a WWF (World Wrestling Federation) character known as “The Repo Man,” who would sneak to the ring and confiscate various props belonging to other WWF wrestlers, a wrestling plumber known as “TL Hopper,” and an appearance by the film character “Robocop” in WCW (World Championship Wrestling) in 1990. These incidents and characters are not revered for their significance or aesthetic quality. Instead, WrestleCrap and many members of the wrestling audience celebrate these aspects of wrestling for their frivolous nature.

The examples in this section demonstrate that the rhetoric of play as frivolous is undermined by members of the wrestling audience who demonstrate that for them, wrestling is

²⁷ WrestleCrap can be accessed at www.wrestlecrap.com.

not a frivolous pastime. Simultaneously, thinking of play as frivolous celebrates frivolity, allowing for a camp aesthetic to emerge that celebrates wastefulness and challenges the notion that one must always be productive. These examples indicate that play, and wrestling for that matter, does matter. These are not useless wastes of time, but they are simultaneously celebratory of wasting time. And since each of the previous six rhetorics responds to and refutes this connection to frivolity, this rhetoric strengthens the framework presented in this analysis for examining the practices of the wrestling audience.

Conclusion

The three wrestling events and the audience behaviors explored in the preceding ethnography represent a microcosm of the very complex processes of wrestling smarks. These smarks are identified, most importantly, by their ability to exhibit knowledge about the genre and text they are engaging, as well as by being able to put aside that knowledge and lose themselves in the text as it is presented. They are both smart fans and easy marks for a particular textual production in this instance, one indistinguishable from the other in their overall identity. This ability to critically engage media texts, including the media industry that produces these texts, as well as enjoy the texts simultaneously, provides a more nuanced conception of how media audiences in the contemporary landscape engage the vast terrain of media content in their lives.

In addition to being able to be both a mark and smart for media content, smarks are inherently playful. As indicated in the introduction to this study, play is the primary concept that explains the behaviors of media smarks, and in the preceding ethnography these playful processes were on full display. Without looking at these processes through Brian Sutton-Smith's

rhetorics of play, the behaviors exhibited during *WrestleMania* weekend are incomprehensible. Wrestling smarks played with their identity as fans of particular performers, often exclaiming how they like a performer before then greeting that same performer with a chorus of jeers (if they were a heel). In these instances, wrestling fans were playing their part, enjoying being a part of the audience and playing along with the narrative even if they did not “really” believe the performer to be a bad person outside of his or her role in the diegesis of professional wrestling. Further, many fans took great joy in playing with the rules themselves in wrestling narratives, cheering for (or against) the character that was designed by the promotion to be jeered (or cheered). In these instances, the fans were playing with the rules themselves, subverting them for their own amusement or their own identity formation. They were literally playing the role of the heel in the audience, disrupting the rules of the wrestling company and the roles of those in attendance. This focus on playing with what is presented in wrestling matches represents a category of audience behavior that previous iterations of audience studies cannot account for, necessitating the incorporation of play studies in our critical understanding of audience processes.

Another aspect of the wrestling smark, and by extension media smarks, is that for these audience members the content that they are fans of matters a great deal to them. This complicates much of the literature on play, as it is often derided as frivolous and inconsequential, but for these fans the wrestling matches, the wrestling company, and their roles in the audience were of paramount importance to them. Many came from great distances, shared memories with friends and families, and cared about the wrestlers and the company that produced the content they enjoyed. They wore the merchandise, spent plenty of money, and expressed how much of their own identity was wrapped up in various wrestling promotions. These people, as evidenced

by the complex processes they exhibited, are not merely marks who are being conned, as they often were able to provide lucid and cogent analyses of what they were seeing. At the same time, these same fans were able to leave the cogent analyses on the side in certain moments and “mark out” when a particular match or performer completely captured their attention.

Finally, despite this chapter being titled “The Wrestling Audience,” this audience is by no means a monolithic entity. Some enjoy playing heel themselves and cheering the heels, others align purely with babyfaces in each match. Many like certain performers for reasons that have nothing to do with whether their character is a babyface or heel, as many fans expressed how they aligned with certain performers because of how well they are able to perform in the ring or how much of their career they have followed. Many members of this wrestling audience prefer certain iterations of the genre, as fans of WWE and ROH have demonstrated during *WrestleMania* weekend. Other companies exist with their own takes on the genre, including Dragon Gate USA, Total Nonstop Action (TNA), Chikara Pro Wrestling, and Pro Wrestling Guerilla (PWG). In addition, there is wrestling in countries like Japan (Pro Wrestling NOAH, All Japan Pro Wrestling, New Japan Pro Wrestling) and Mexico (AAA and CMLL). And fans of each promotion or iteration of wrestling have different things they value in their version of the genre, making it impossible to fully demarcate the processes of all wrestling fans. Instead, this ethnography of *WrestleMania* weekend in Atlanta of 2011 provides a starting point where the behaviors of wrestling smarks was on full display. The next chapter will focus on how the distinctions between wrestling fans of WWE and ROH manifest themselves online within what is known as the Internet Wrestling Community (IWC). The types of aesthetic value judgments that demarcate the allegiance of wrestling fans will be explored in relation to the behaviors of

wrestling smarks in this chapter, as well as how genres such as MMA complicate the allegiances of wrestling fans.

Chapter Two

The Internet Wrestling Community (IWC): Fantasy Booking and the Online Play of Wrestling Smarks

Introduction

“We are the storytellers of the story of professional wrestling.”
-Ari Berenstein (2010)

This chapter explores the manifestation of the wrestling audience online, collectively known as the Internet Wrestling Community (IWC).²⁸ The previous chapter examined the wrestling audience that congregated at specific wrestling events on a particular weekend of the calendar year, as many fans came to Atlanta for the staging of WWE’s *WrestleMania XXVII* at the Georgia Dome (as well as some fans coming to the two Ring of Honor events at Center Stage in Atlanta). *WrestleMania* weekend was a destination for members of the wrestling audience, marking it as distinct from the broader context of their wrestling fandom. This fandom is most perceptible, however, within the online spaces of websites devoted to the wrestling genre. After all, wrestling events are held across the globe by a variety of wrestling companies. A singular wrestling audience would obviously have great difficulty following this vast product in person. In addition to live events that are held globally nearly every evening there are, of course, wrestling events that appear on television and online nearly every night of the week, as well as a long history of wrestling matches on videotape (once upon a time) and DVDs to further satiate

²⁸ There is some consternation within the online fan community of professional wrestling regarding this label, as we shall see later in this chapter. Most of the debate hinges on a rejection of some stereotypes of online wrestling fandom.

the wrestling audience's desire for wrestling content. The everyday practices of the wrestling audience can best be examined through their manifestation online, as wrestling websites become online destinations for many fans of the genre. It is within these online spaces where what is valued by the IWC is considered and debated. This chapter focuses on these online debates, examining how the IWC deliberates over notions of value and why these deliberations are so important to the genre of professional wrestling. In particular, Marx's notions of "use value" and "exchange value" are mobilized within these IWC debates, demonstrating how this community seemingly splits into two over fundamental differences. As we shall see, these differences can be reconciled, revealing that there is more consensus in the IWC than members realize.

The IWC really rose to prominence in the nineties, coinciding with the obvious proliferation of internet users as digital technology became more ubiquitous.²⁹ For wrestling fans, the nineties was dominated by the era known as "The Monday Night Wars," which featured Vince McMahon's WWE (then known as the World Wrestling Federation, or WWF) going head to head with the Turner-owned World Championship Wrestling (WCW) each Monday night on television (Reynolds and Alvarez, 2004). Fans would watch the shows and subsequently go to various websites to debate the merits of each promotion, as well as to speculate about the narrative directions of the various wrestlers and performers in the major wrestling companies. The Monday Night Wars ended in 2001 when McMahon purchased WCW from Time Warner for less than three million dollars (Reynolds and Alvarez, 2004). McMahon and WWE essentially had a monopoly over the mainstream wrestling landscape in the United States, and in the years since have exerted this influence on a global scale by expanding into countries like

²⁹ For more detail on the connection of fan communities to digital technology see Elizabeth Bird's (2003) *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* and Henry Jenkins' (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*.

Mexico.³⁰ There remains some competition to the WWE's wrestling monopoly, including companies with national television deals like TNA (Total Nonstop Action) on Spike. However, TNA's content often reflects the WWE model of professional wrestling, as opposed as an alternative to that model.³¹ For this reason the most contested debates within the IWC revolve around how independent promotions like Ring of Honor are distinct from WWE, serving as alternatives to the dominant model of professional wrestling in the twenty-first century. This chapter will examine the differences between WWE and ROH that are highlighted by these online discourses of the IWC, as these fans of the wrestling genre debate the merits of two very different conceptions of that genre. Figure Two illustrates how different the features of WWE and ROH are, as well as how the features of each promotion are related to the formation of an aesthetic that privileges one over the other. For WWE fans, the features of WWE encourage a "popular aesthetic," while the features of ROH are more representative of a "bourgeois aesthetic" (Bourdieu, 1984). As we shall see, Bourdieu's notion of the popular aesthetic focuses on the tastes and preferences of the working class while the bourgeois aesthetic refers to the conspicuous consumption practices of the upper class. Further, these two aesthetics are the result of how each group fetishizes either Marx's exchange value (WWE) or use value (ROH). However, since Bourdieu's categories are meant as labels that reflect the habitus of different classes, they are offered here as useful rubrics that reflect a WWE aesthetic (popular aesthetic) and a ROH aesthetic (bourgeois aesthetic) within the IWC.

³⁰ Wrestling journalists like Dave Meltzer have chronicled the WWE's global expansion extensively in the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* over the years.

³¹ This critique of TNA is articulated most explicitly by Bryan Alvarez and his *Figure Four Weekly* newsletter, as well as his weekly audio podcast entitled *The Bryan and Vinny Show*, which features Alvarez and his co-host Vince Verhei reviewing wrestling programming for the website's subscribers.

Fetishization Conception of Professional Wrestling Conception of Smark	WWE (Popular) Aesthetic Exchange Value Sports Entertainment Smark – Overly Critical, Snark	ROH (Bourgeois) Aesthetic Use Value Professional Wrestling Smark – A Smart Wrestling Fan Who Is Capable of Marking Out Technique (Match Quality, Star Ratings for Matches)
Quantification Features	Revenue (Nielsen Ratings, Pay- Per-View Buyrates, Attendance) Spectacle (Excess, Expensive Sets, Pyrotechnics, Large Bodies)	Independence (Minimal Production Values, Youth, Athletic Bodies)
Mode of Address	Casual Fans, Mass Audience (May Not Be Knowledgeable About Wrestling)	Wrestling Fans, Niche Audience That Is Knowledgeable About Wrestling

Figure 2

The online debates in the IWC are significant because they determine how the history of the wrestling genre is written. The quote that began this chapter states it succinctly: that the IWC is responsible for chronicling and interpreting the story of professional wrestling, including how it will be remembered in the future. This is not to suggest that it is solely written and recorded by wrestling fans, as journalists and critics like Dave Meltzer, Bryan Alvarez, Wade Keller, Mike Johnson, and Dave Lagana are a few of the most prominent figures in the wrestling genre who are attempting to interpret and chronicle the history of professional wrestling. The most influential figure in this historiographic process is the WWE itself, most prominently Vince McMahon. As the head of WWE, which is the most successful wrestling company in the world, McMahon's vision of wrestling is the version that is most visible to wrestling fans. In addition, many of the official DVD releases of WWE, as well as their weekly broadcasts, feature what can be described as a revisionist history of the wrestling genre.³² The accounts of the IWC are

³² Vince McMahon's WWE has purchased the tape libraries of many defunct wrestling companies over the years and then uses those libraries to tell partial accounts of wrestling history. For example, a recent DVD documentary entitled *The Rise and Fall of WCW* (2009) detailed the history of WCW as being a major corporate entity with unlimited funding against a

representative of dissenting views, alternative histories of the wrestling genre that do not necessarily tow the company line of those with the economic power to determine recorded history. As we will see in this chapter, there are multiple alternative histories within the IWC, as this community is no more a monolithic entity than the wrestling audience detailed in the previous chapter. But the differences within the IWC are representative of what matters to wrestling fans, even if they do not all always agree on the outcome of that debate.

The IWC's debates about the merits of professional wrestling provide an enormous amount of data to interpret. The best framework for interpreting these online debates is the concept of play, as members of the IWC make their engagement with wrestling texts into a game. More accurately, the IWC exhibits a need to somehow quantify a genre that has roots in sport yet simultaneously exists outside of legitimate competition. After all, wrestling is scripted entertainment where the performers are attempting to construct a narrative that appears to be legitimate sport while also attempting to protect the health and wellbeing of their fellow performers. Wrestling fans who are smart are aware of this scripted aspect of the wrestling genre, but they also seem to search for aspects that are indeed legitimately competitive. Whether it is how certain wrestlers are used by a particular wrestling company or how a particular wrestling company compares to others in the genre, the wrestling matches and performances are often viewed as data by the IWC that can be evaluated and assigned value. Given the complex nature of the wrestling genre, there seems to be a fixation on finding something that can be quantified by members of the IWC, something that can provide clear cut answers as to which aesthetic (ROH or WWE) should be emphasized. In this way the IWC can come to some form

more modest WWE promotion owned by Vince McMahon. What this history does not detail is how McMahon had many economic advantages of his own, including deals with many cable companies that he used to combat WCW's national growth (Meltzer, 2009).

of consensus, debating about the merits of a particular company or performance of the genre. Even more importantly, these IWC debates determine the history of the genre, as members of this fan community can attempt to craft the history or story of professional wrestling.

In addition to the IWC determining value by quantifying certain aspects of the wrestling genre, the IWC also plays with wrestling content by “fantasy booking” wrestling narratives (Alvarez, 2011). Fantasy booking is a behavior of smarks who take the narratives that are presented by specific wrestling companies and attempt to discern where they are going, as well as offer how they would direct the narrative if they were given control. In this way smarks are able to take the raw material provided by wrestling companies and construct their own fantasy scenarios that they then share in online contexts. These fantasy scenarios are then equally debated and deliberated over by the IWC, as the community attempts to form a consensus of how the company should narratively proceed. These fantasy narratives are also often compared to what actually happens in wrestling texts, whether to demonstrate one’s subcultural capital by successfully predicting the outcome or to debate the merits of what actually happened with what could have happened had the wrestling organization proceeded in the way suggested by the IWC. This behavior is obviously not exclusive to the IWC, as scholars such as Henry Jenkins (1992) have written extensively about creative audience practices. For the IWC, these exhibitions of play are significant because they are often composed of the value judgments that the community makes about the genre at large. We can discern what these groups value by evaluating how they come to their valuations about particular generic texts. The significance of fantasy booking is that it reveals a commonality between these two seemingly irreconcilable groups, as they are able to transcend their differences to play with the possibilities provided by fantasy scenarios as fans of professional wrestling.

This chapter will examine how the IWC makes its value assessments, identifying the paradigms favored by fans of both WWE and ROH. Beginning with an analysis of how both WWE and ROH self-identify with the genre of professional wrestling, the distinctions between these two groups of fans and how they embody two distinct aesthetics will be explored. These aesthetic paradigms are based on a need to quantify the wrestling genre in order to justify the privileging of either a bourgeois or popular aesthetic. The WWE fans use numbers like revenue generated and Nielsen ratings to insist on the WWE's dominance in the genre. ROH fans, on the other hand, use more aesthetic claims linked to star ratings of individual matches to state their position of ROH's superiority in the wrestling genre. The features of these two wrestling promotions are also valued differently by each group, as WWE fans privilege the spectacle of WWE while ROH features an aesthetic that celebrates its independence from WWE's wrestling monolith. Each company also differs in its mode of address, with WWE targeting a mass audience that may not be familiar with the wrestling genre while ROH cultivates a knowledgeable wrestling fan that is familiar with wrestling's history and with wrestling promotions outside of North America. These differences in how each company conceptualizes its audience are echoed by the audiences themselves, as each set of fans differs on what a wrestling smark is. WWE fans label the smark as elitist wrestling fans who overly criticize every aspect of WWE programming, while ROH fans seem more open to identifying with the label, which refers to the aforementioned ability to suspend disbelief and mark out over wrestling texts despite having the knowledge of a smart fan.

These seemingly irreconcilable differences are ultimately synthesized by the desire of wrestling fans to fantasy book for their favorite wrestling promotion. In the context of fantasy booking, the differences between ROH (bourgeois) and WWE (popular) aesthetics are

transcended, allowing the wrestling audience to come together and play with the content provided in wrestling texts. The fantasy booking case study in this chapter explores the IWC in relation to former ROH wrestler CM Punk delivering a “worked-shoot” promo on WWE television that mentioned many of the criticisms leveled on WWE by ROH fans. Worked-shoot promos refer to interview segments in wrestling that are part of the scripted narrative that also discuss information that is outside of the diegetic universe of wrestling texts. This promo generated an enormous reaction amongst the entire IWC, transcending the differences that define many of the WWE and ROH fans. The concept of play is most useful for understanding these mark-out moments where even the most jaded critic of WWE or ROH suddenly and momentarily forgets that this is all a show and exhibits a genuine connection to the content provided.

The Bourgeois and Popular Aesthetics of Professional Wrestling

In my ethnography of the Internet Wrestling Community I noticed that the fundamental rift within the community centered on how wrestling fans conceptualize value in relation to the genre. This chapter provides a framework for understanding how members of the IWC consider value by incorporating Marx’s notions of use-value and exchange-value. These concepts reveal fundamental aspects of two distinct aesthetic paradigms within the IWC, namely the WWE (popular) and ROH (bourgeois) aesthetics. The connection between these two aesthetics and value reveal where the IWC diverges so strongly and creates two seemingly irreconcilable camps within the singular wrestling audience. The concept of play allows us the opportunity to traverse these distinctions within the IWC, highlighting the commonalities within this fan community despite their notable differences.

At the core of the debate over value within the IWC is the difference between use-value and exchange-value as defined by Marx in *Capital* (1867). Marxist scholar David Harvey (1990) differentiates between the two by stating that a commodity's use value "fulfills a particular want or need" while a commodity's exchange value can be used "as a bargaining chip to procure other commodities"(p. 100). These are two determinations of value for any commodity in Marxist theory, and the use value of that commodity is a more subjective notion of value for the individual consumer whereas the exchange value of a commodity is how that commodity is assigned value within a capitalist system, what it can command in the capitalist market. This is a distinction that has extraordinary importance, as the notion of value is separated into how an individual assesses a commodity (use value) and how the capitalist system assesses a commodity (exchange value). These are two distinct determinations of value that are seemingly at odds with each other since one privileges the subjective pleasure one takes from a commodity (use value) and the other privileges how that commodity is monetarily valued within a capitalist system (exchange value).

This distinction between use value and exchange value is apparent in every commodity, including the genre of professional wrestling. Fan scholar Matt Hills (2002) states that use value and exchange value must be thought of dialectically since they can never fully be separated from a commodity. That is precisely what the concept of play provides, as the distinctions between use value and exchange value are synthesized within the wrestling audience through their play processes. However, the IWC crystallizes the distinctions between these two notions of value by fetishizing exchange value (in the case of WWE fans) and use value (in the case of ROH fans). The fetishization of exchange value occurs by WWE fans using quantifiable indicators of revenue as evidence of the superiority of WWE in the wrestling genre. These fans focus on

Nielsen ratings and buyrates, indicators that demonstrate how WWE's value is determined within the capitalist marketplace. ROH fans, on the other hand, fetishize use value by focusing on the pure aesthetics of ROH matches. They too attempt to quantify indicators of success, but these indicators are subjective interpretations of how successful a particular match was and how much the match allowed them to mark out as fans. This distinction between the two sets of fans in the wrestling audience is not meant to suggest that the other group does not also share some of these value assessments. Instead, each set of fans privilege either exchange value or use value to hierarchically position one wrestling organization over the other.

By fetishizing exchange value WWE fans also privilege the features of WWE programming that are focused on presenting a spectacle, including the expensive sets and pyrotechnic displays, since they are markers of exchange value. WWE's economic success is written all over their productions, as their production values are beyond reproach according to many in the IWC. ROH, on the other hand, espouses their fetishization of use value by showcasing a minimalist production style, revealing their limited budget and their focus on match quality over production values. The features of each promotion reveal both their conception of value (use vs. exchange) and the sensibility of their fans who champion the aesthetics offered by their respective wrestling promotion.

Each group's fetishization of a particular notion of value results in the formation of a distinct aesthetic. Using Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) framework of popular and bourgeois aesthetics, which are useful explanatory terms for understanding the distinct differences within the wrestling audience, the features of each wrestling promotion and the paradigms of their fans become reflective of these sensibilities. Of course, for Bourdieu, the key distinction between the popular and bourgeois aesthetics is class, as the popular aesthetic is the aesthetic of the working

class, or the aesthetic of people who do not have plenty. The bourgeois aesthetic is representative of how the upper classes distinguish themselves from the working class. John Fiske (1992) describes the bourgeois aesthetic as one that, “promotes and privileges certain cultural tastes and competences, particularly through the educational system, but also through other institutions such as art galleries, concert halls, museums, and state subsidies to the arts, which taken together constitute ‘high’ culture (ranging from the traditional to the avant-garde)”(p. 31). These distinctions between high and low culture, between bourgeois and popular aesthetics, reflect a person’s “habitus” according to Bourdieu, which refers to how culture is talked about and experienced as one is growing up. One’s habitus is learned over time, to the point that it is taken for granted by the individual, resulting in how that person privileges one aesthetic over the other.

Bourdieu describes the popular aesthetic as “the subordination of form to function,” revealing a privileging of exchange value over any subjective notion of use value (1984, p. 32). Within this popular aesthetic, which fetishizes exchange value, there are implicit glorifications of capitalist ideology, as by celebrating the popular aesthetic one validates the notion that the free market is always right. In this way, the popular aesthetic can be conceptualized as the will of the people, as it is theoretically reflective of the values of the working class. Within this aesthetic, WWE and its fans, who privilege exchange value and emphasize function over form, are aesthetically superior due to their support from mass audiences and economic success. In turn, WWE targets these mass audiences as potential customers for their content, embodying the “American Dream” of a small company providing a service and being rewarded by the marketplace. In this narrative, WWE serves as a sort of Horatio Alger story, as well as constant validation for fellow wrestling fans that their pastime is echoed by others throughout the world.

ROH, on the other hand, becomes emblematic of a bourgeois aesthetic, one that values form over function. ROH fans celebrate the intricacies of various wrestling matches from both ROH and other wrestling promotions throughout the world, often recalling minute details of those matches to fellow fans as demonstrations of conspicuous consumption within the wrestling genre. In addition, following these ROH events (as well as events from other promotions similar to ROH like Pro Wrestling Guerilla (PWG)) requires a significant investment of money and time, as these events are often seen through fans purchasing DVD copies of the events from the company, which can be around three hours in length per event. Further, those who see these shows may also see them via various torrent sites, demonstrating a technological sophistication that distinguishes these fans from WWE fans who simply watch the product on television. These distinctions are clearly similar to a bourgeois habitus, as these fans are celebrating the aesthetic form of wrestling matches and consuming matches that are less available to the masses as a demonstration of conspicuous consumption. As we shall see, many ROH fans also condemn WWE for appealing to the least common denominator in favor of the smaller, niche audience of wrestling fans who ardently follow the product. This critique is echoed by “indie” fans in numerous other genres and media, revealing an emphasis on the use value of a commodity for an individual over the commodity’s exchange value in the marketplace. For example, Michael Z. Newman (2011) discusses the aesthetics of independent film by attributing signifiers such as “personal” and “small” to them, similar aspects of ROH’s presentation of professional wrestling. Implicit in this aesthetic is a critique of WWE’s near-monopoly of the wrestling genre, as well as a critique of a capitalist oligopoly. Rather than celebrate the exchange value of ROH, the company’s fans celebrate technique and form by attempting to quantify wrestling matches

themselves. This fetishization of use value comes off as elitist to many WWE fans, further illuminating a fissure within the IWC that the concept of play helps us traverse.

The irony of the manifestation of a bourgeois aesthetic in professional wrestling is obvious, as the genre is often associated with mass tastes and sensibilities (Jenkins, 1997). I noticed in my ethnography that this bourgeois aesthetic of ROH fans is distinctly less strident than the snobbery often associated with scholars like Adorno and the Frankfurt School, as well as many of the indie film fans identified by Newman (2011). For example, when a wrestler from ROH is signed by WWE, many of the ROH fans are congratulatory towards the wrestler, noting how he will earn considerably more money in WWE and finally be financially compensated for his labor. This is but one moment where the distinctions between these two paradigms are collapsed within the IWC. Fantasy booking plays a role in this as well, as many of the ROH fans begin to fantasy book their departing ROH wrestler and imagine him in WWE, applying the aesthetic championed in ROH to the context of WWE. As we shall see, these aesthetic distinctions are simultaneously pronounced and collapsed within the IWC through the use of play, revealing a fan community that is equally contentious and congruous.

Bourdieu's categories of bourgeois and popular aesthetics are also problematic within the realm of professional wrestling due to how each promotion inverts these categories in intriguing ways. WWE exhibits many aspects of the popular aesthetic, but ironically the way that the popular aesthetic is espoused by WWE fans is through these fans' commodifying themselves for the benefit of the promotion. By focusing on how much revenue the company generates, those who privilege WWE are essentially turning their bodies and eyeballs into commodities to be accumulated by the publicly traded company, significantly complicating Bourdieu's notion of the popular aesthetic. The bourgeois aesthetic associated with ROH is equally problematized by

ROH fans who champion a strong work ethic rather than merely celebrating art for art's sake. The ROH fans celebrate the aesthetic performance for the work and sacrifice of the wrestlers rather than the slick production values of WWE, which complicates Bourdieu's notion of the bourgeois aesthetic that is not associated with notions of labor and work ethic.

The distinctions between Bourdieu's bourgeois and popular aesthetics are further complicated in the IWC due to the lack of class identification online. For Bourdieu, the manifestation of one of these two aesthetics was inextricably tied to class and one's habitus, but online this is harder to discern due to the anonymous nature of online discourse. It is not surprising that the bourgeois aesthetic is overrepresented online due to the digital divide, as many of the fans who populate online forums clearly have the time to engage in wrestling discussion online and the technological sophistication and access to meet in these online contexts. The exact demographics of these two sections of the wrestling audience are difficult to discern and easily mapping the two aesthetics is complicated. But through my research it seems that WWE fans are more representative of the working class habitus since WWE content is readily available on television for at least four hours per week. ROH fans, on the other hand, are more representative of the bourgeois aesthetic and are more technologically savvy as a group. Of course, Bourdieu's aesthetic categories are the result of one's habitus and are intended as explanatory labels, so in the rest of this chapter I will refer to wrestling fans who prefer ROH as favoring a "ROH Aesthetic" while wrestling fans who prefer WWE as championing a "WWE Aesthetic."

Locating and Monitoring the Internet Wrestling Community

There are innumerable websites and forums devoted to professional wrestling on the internet in 2011. An analysis of the internet wrestling community cannot possibly include every online destination for wrestling fans. This chapter does present a broad range of online manifestations of wrestling fandom, however, serving as a microcosm of the larger IWC. Of course, this ethnography is intended as a cross-section of the IWC, but there are numerous wrestling fans who are not part of this study. For example, the digital divide automatically makes many wrestling fans undetectable in this study, as many wrestling fans do not actively participate in the IWC. In addition, many of the casual fans courted by WWE are difficult to examine, as only the more devoted wrestling fans spend time posting messages in online forums devoted to the genre. However, this is not meant to underestimate the significance of the responses in this study, as these themes and aesthetic paradigms are what stood out from my years of attention to this project. And these paradigms are coming from those who know the genre best, taking time out of their lives to interact with fellow wrestling fans in a variety of online contexts. The four websites and forums examined in this chapter are each distinct enough from each other that they represent various facets of wrestling fandom without total overlap. Due to each website's distinctive features, a more heterogeneous conception of the IWC emerges, as wrestling fans with particular affiliations to a wrestling company or specific ideas of how to assess value to the wrestling genre will be balanced by opposing viewpoints from other facets of the IWC. I have examined these forums over many years, monitoring the behaviors of these internet fans of professional wrestling. This familiarity with the IWC allows me to interpret the practices observed at these various online destinations. The online practices of the IWC will also be examined in relation to the online presence of wrestling journalists and critics

who maintain a significant internet presence, as these figures often serve as taste-makers and provide context to the debates and deliberations of the IWC.

Of course, the demographics of these online users is difficult to discern considering the anonymity of online discourse. What I was able to glean concerned the approximate age range of these online members. I was able to discern this in relation to their nostalgia over different periods in wrestling history, as many would confess in their online discourse how they remember a particular character or match from when they were kids. Most prominently on all four sites were forum members who were in their early twenties who remember the “Monday Night Wars” between WWE and WCW in the late nineties from their childhoods. These fans often romanticized the WWE’s “Attitude Era” of this time period and some would often comment how they remembered a particular occurrence from their childhood. There were others on these forums who got into wrestling in the eighties and were now in their thirties, often fondly recalling characters like Hulk Hogan, Randy “Macho Man” Savage, and “Mr. Perfect” Curt Hennig from their childhood. Of course there were some who were older and some who were younger on these forums, but overall the two most concentrated ages were connected to periods in wrestling history when wrestling was culturally popular.

The first online forum examined in this chapter is the official message forum of Ring of Honor found at <http://www.rohforum.com/forum/>. The forum is linked from the ROH website and is dedicated to discussion of Ring of Honor-related topics. Any discussion of other wrestling companies, such as WWE, is conducted in relation to how they compare to ROH. This internet forum was selected due to the presence of online discourse focused specifically on Ring of Honor and how it compares to other wrestling companies. Fans of independent wrestling, and ROH specifically, congregate on the ROH forum to discuss the merits of ROH and how those

merits compare to other wrestling promotions, making this online destination an ideal component of this analysis. Given the forum's focus on ROH, there is only tangential information on WWE, but what is included on this forum is significant since the moderators of the forum would delete it unless a comparison is made between the two promotions (ROH and WWE), even if the comparison is unflattering toward ROH. This is precisely the kind of discourse I am examining in this chapter. The limitations of this website, which will be compensated for with the other three selections in this chapter, are that the posts included on the forum are moderated by people working for ROH (although they are surprisingly tolerant of posts that do criticize ROH) and that the posts are so focused on ROH, meaning that events that occur in wrestling with no relation to ROH are not open for discussion. According to the website there are 1543 registered members of this forum, although this number is misleading as the website was redesigned in April 2010 as part of an upgrade to the company's website, necessitating that all members re-register for the forum. At this time, there appeared to be a dramatic decline in the traffic at the forum, as many members lamented that with the website redesign a lot of the history on the old board was lost. For example, one member posted that, "I miss the old board though, for its information and everything though. And I miss my post count."³³ This loss of post counts and history destabilized the subcultural capital many members of the fan community had accumulated, and it appeared many chose to move on to new online destinations rather than start from scratch on the new message forum.

The ROH message forum is composed predominantly of ROH fans and the most ardent fans of the wrestling genre since ROH maintains a very limited presence in the media

³³ Creepshow. (April 15, 2010). Thoughts on the New ROH Board?. Message posted to <http://www.rohforum.com/forum/>

landscape.³⁴ In order to balance the IWC discourse on the ROH forums I also looked at posts made at <http://www.411mania.com>, which focuses on a variety of aspects of popular culture including wrestling, music, movies, television, and games. The portion of the 411mania website devoted to wrestling covers multiple wrestling companies, including ROH and WWE, but the readers appear to be most interested in WWE-related content. In fact, many of the posts that are made on this website from readers often lament the amount of coverage that smaller wrestling companies like ROH receive. For example, many posts feature hostile criticisms of independent wrestlers and wrestling promotions, saying things like, “Indie wrestlers should not be allowed to feature in the wrestler of the week. They have achieved NOTHING until they have been in WWE or TNA.”³⁵ As we shall see, these criticisms of independent wrestling dominate the discourses of online WWE fans, and this example is representative of much of the feedback on the 411mania website. It is no surprise that the readers of 411mania are representative of the WWE fans as the site focuses on many facets of popular culture, unlike the ROH forum that is devoted only to the small wrestling company. This website is also distinct from the ROH forum because it also does not require those who post responses to the columns that appear on the site to register an account. Instead of an online forum, the 411mania website features columns posted to the site where readers can comment on the posts. The posts devoted to WWE get the most comments, and when a post features non-WWE content the result is often for anonymous readers to criticize the significance of independent wrestling. The 411mania website is the

³⁴ At the time of this writing ROH will soon debut on television stations owned by Sinclair Broadcasting Group, which bought the company on May 21, 2011. The promotion announced the sale on its website at <http://www.rohwrestling.com/news/ring-of-honor-announces-sale-to-sinclair-broadcast-group/>.

³⁵ Humpty. (April 5, 2010). 411's Wrestler of the Week 04.05.10_Week 1. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/134900>

online destination most open to any one who wants to contribute, but it is also the site where the most vilification of any non-WWE entity takes place.

A third perspective of the IWC that is included in this chapter is from the message forum for the wrestling website known as “WrestleCrap.”³⁶ WrestleCrap is a website devoted to the most absurd aspects of the history of professional wrestling, celebrating the gimmicks, characters, and matches that are more infamous than famous. The website and its community celebrate the moments with little subcultural capital in the genre, playfully repurposing these events and instilling in them a new cache to be revered, even if only for its camp sensibilities. In this way, the readers of this website can celebrate the frivolity of wrestling, taking pleasure in remembering a wrestling plumber, for example. The members of this community focus on all of professional wrestling, but there is much more attention paid to WWE than any other promotion. This is due to the prominence of WWE in the cultural landscape. WrestleCrap also focuses on WWE quite often because WWE is the promotion that has created more campy characters and gimmicks than any other current promotion. This legacy is because of WWE’s focus on the elusive “mass” audience, as for the company to survive it must appeal to more than just wrestling fans, resulting in the genesis of innumerable wrestling characters that are stereotypical and two-dimensional. The feeling seems to be that the mass audience can only appreciate superficial characters, a critique leveled at mass audiences throughout the network era of television (Gitlin,

³⁶ On May 17, 2011 the operators of the Wrestlecrap website found at www.wrestlecrap.com split from the original message board that was run by a member of the website who wanted to focus more on popular culture (freakinawesomenetwork.com), creating two message boards for two distinct websites. However, most of the members of the original message forum for Wrestlecrap remained on the forum now associated with the FreakinAwesomeNetwork. For this reason, this chapter will focus solely on the message forum that is now located at <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi> and referred to as the FreakinAwesomeNetwork because of its past affiliation with WrestleCrap and the limited amount of change since the formation of a second online forum.

1984). This site provides a nice counterpoint to the more serious wrestling websites like the www.f4wonline.com, which offers more of a journalistic account of the wrestling and mixed-martial-arts genres rather than the more celebratory WrestleCrap website. However, many of the people who post on the WrestleCrap forums take the wrestling genre very seriously, even if it is the love of the absurd qualities of professional wrestling that initially drew them to this online destination.

The final website examined in this chapter is the online forum of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* and *Figure Four Weekly* newsletter located at www.f4wonline.com. Known as “The Board,” this forum is distinct from the other websites examined in this chapter because it is composed of wrestling fans who follow the work of critics Dave Meltzer (*Wrestling Observer Newsletter*) and Bryan Alvarez (*Figure Four Weekly*). These critics follow the backstage narratives of all the various promotions in the wrestling and mixed-martial-arts genres, as well as offer their own analysis of each event they see. People subscribe to their website to get access to their commentary and analysis, paying \$10.99 per month for access to each author’s newsletter and the seven-to-ten audio podcasts that are uploaded to the site each week. In addition, this price allows subscribers to post messages on The Board. This subscription fee distinguishes this portion of the IWC from the other three forums because of the amount of economic capital required to be a member of this community. In addition, because each of the users who post on The Board are paying members who presumably follow the work of Meltzer and Alvarez, the users of The Board are comprised of the most knowledgeable wrestling fans in the IWC. As we shall see, the actual content on The Board is often inconsistent with this presumption, as The Board is mostly unmoderated and those who post there continually troll other members, as well as website contributors like Todd Martin and even Bryan Alvarez. Alvarez will then address his

frustrations with The Board on many of his audio podcasts, which only encourages further trolling from members of The Board. For example, on the August 2, 2011 edition of Alvarez's podcast known as *Figure Four Daily*, Alvarez readily admits to occasionally saying things that he knows will generate harsh reactions on The Board. Rather than being interpreted as hostile, there seems to be a mutual appreciation for the trolling efforts of The Board, as well as a bond that is developed by members of the community despite their overt antagonisms and trolling.³⁷ Much like wrestling itself, it appears the users on The Board play with personae while they talk about wrestling. In this way, what appears to be a forum of unsophisticated trolls should actually be interpreted as a group of fans who know the genre so well that they can play a character online that pays tribute to the wrestling genre while simultaneously critiquing that same genre.

In addition to the four online forums discussed above, this chapter will also supplement the processes of the IWC with other prominent online content on the wrestling genre. The combination of fan discussion with this online content will provide the most comprehensive view of the discourses that dominate the IWC. This content was selected because it often shapes the debates that appear on the four websites outlined above. The work of Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez, which is found in the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* and *Figure Four Weekly* respectively, helps shape the discourse in the IWC due to each critic's prominence in the wrestling industry. Meltzer has followed the industry for over thirty years, starting his newsletter

³⁷ This bond is best exemplified by the passing of a subscriber known as "worshiptheram." When news of his illness and subsequent passing began circulating members of The Board dropped their "gimmicks" and started a fund to help cover his medical costs and offer support to his family in a thread on The Board that is now stickied at the top of every forum. The thread was originally titled "Get Well Rammy" and later renamed "Rest in peace, Rammy" after his passing. In the thread Karl Steffey's (worshiptheram) sister was given an account to respond to the well wishes from members of The Board and indicated that she read Karl the messages that were posted from his online friends, people who he never met in person but brought him solace in his last days.

in 1982, and Bryan Alvarez started his career in 1995. Both men are respected in the wrestling industry and by fans who follow the wrestling industry. In addition to their work, the www.f4wonline.com website often features content provided by other critics of the wrestling genre, including Todd Martin, who writes for the *Los Angeles Times*. The content provided by these critics of the genre represents another set of data, as the debates that dominate the IWC are often set in motion by these organic intellectuals. Another source of data in this chapter is the great number of podcasts that appear on the www.f4wonline.com website, as Bryan Alvarez hosts internet shows with interviews featuring many prominent figures in the wrestling industry, as well as a variety of shows produced that cover wrestling in Japan, Mexico and independent wrestling. These podcasts feature content that both reflects the deliberations of the IWC and that helps shape the debates of the IWC, making them equally important sources of information. Finally, the newsletters themselves feature a wealth of information about the wrestling industry. For this chapter I have followed both newsletters produced by Meltzer and Alvarez since 2006. Each author provides at least one new newsletter a week, meaning that there have been over 260 newsletters produced by these authors in the past five years.³⁸ This data complements the data provided by the IWC and the four websites detailed above. In total, the past five year have provided me a tremendous amount of data to interpret and allowed me to be uniquely capable of comprehending the processes of the IWC for this project.

The benefits of the ethnography in this chapter compensate for the limitations of the previous chapter, as that ethnography was based on what was observed at three events during one weekend of the year. This chapter's focus on the IWC allows for a much more expansive set of data to interpret and over a much greater period of time. In addition, much of wrestling fandom

³⁸ Meltzer often produces more than one issue of his newsletter each week, and many of his issues are double-sized issues.

is located on the internet as the numerous websites devoted to the genre transcend the geographic and temporal obstacles that fracture the wrestling audience. Finally, the data collected in this chapter is distinct from the previous chapter because all of the information contained here was completely unsolicited. Rather than ask members of the wrestling audience questions and observe their behaviors in person, as I did in the previous chapter, I simply lurked on these websites and observed the discourses that members of the IWC engaged in. This ethnographic choice alleviates the obstacle of the researcher influencing the data provided by respondents, as instead of soliciting specific information I observed online discourses over a number of years and noticed key themes that began to dominate these online discourses. This unsolicited information can then be coupled with the participant observation and interviews conducted in the previous chapter to illuminate more fully the practices of wrestling fans.

Of course this online ethnography has several limitations as well, just as any methodological choice would have. Most prominent of all limitations is the lack of a specific site to monitor respondents and their behaviors. Online communities are exactly that, online communities where members can assume roles that may not be consistent with their “real life” identities. In addition, many of the posts that I observe could have been made by a single person with several accounts, or in the case of www.411mania.com, a single person making multiple anonymous posts. Rather than presume that all of these posts mirror the information that I could record if I was there in person, the practices of the IWC must always be seen as part of the IWC, with an emphasis on the internet portion of the acronym. Another limitation of this chapter’s data is that just like the wrestling audience detailed in the previous chapter, the IWC is not a monolithic entity that is able to fully come to a consensus. There is always dissent, even amongst the more homogenous ROH audience of hardcore wrestling fans. Any conclusion that

can be drawn from this data is more accurately identified as an emerging theme within the IWC rather than a full consensus or verdict of every wrestling fan on the internet. Finally, the data in this chapter is only a portion of the total IWC. A sincere attempt was made to present diversity in the four websites evaluated in this chapter, as detailed above. However, there are certainly many other websites devoted to the wrestling genre on the internet, with a great variety of contributors frequenting these online destinations. And of course, many of the people on one website may also frequent other online destinations devoted to wrestling, including the four websites in this analysis. These limitations, however, do not discount the data provided here. Instead, they represent further research that could be done on the vast array of processes exhibited by the fans of the wrestling genre.

Having identified the IWC and how fans of both WWE and ROH exhibit a popular and bourgeois aesthetic respectively, the rest of this chapter will examine how these aesthetic paradigms manifest themselves online. I will examine the ways that members of the IWC respond to how both companies conceptualize professional wrestling. In particular, the WWE's attempts to rebrand itself as "sports entertainment" instead of professional wrestling will be examined in relation to how members of the IWC respond to this rebranding effort. This analysis leads into how each company and its fans view wrestling smarks, as many in the IWC who champion WWE think of wrestling smarks as elitist snobs, while those who prefer the ROH aesthetic seem more likely to embrace the label. The distinctions between WWE and ROH will then be examined in terms of how each company and its fans attempts to quantify success or value, with WWE fetishizing exchange value while ROH fetishizes use value. These fetishistic choices result in distinct features of both companies, with WWE emphasizing the spectacle while ROH focuses on minimalistic production values. Finally, the mode of address of each company

will be examined, with WWE aiming its product towards mass audiences while ROH embraces the niche audience of professional wrestling. These distinctions between the two companies and their fans' aesthetic paradigms reveal the schism within the IWC that dominates the online discourse at the four websites I examined in this study.

The differences in the aesthetic paradigms observed within the IWC represent the broader applicability of play and game studies in understanding the processes of media audiences. The focus on box office receipts and match ratings demonstrate the audience's propensity to make media content a game. These fans attempt to quantify the wrestling genre in a way that a firm and final determination of winners and losers can be ascertained. This desire for quantification perhaps derives from the genre's perceived inherent lack of competition. Winners and losers in wrestling are predetermined and even in winning a match the victor could be the loser (such as winning a match but the match being poorly received by the audience or failing to attract attention from paying customers). Similarly, the loser of the match could "get over" in losing by making his or her opponent look good in the match, which would be an attribute valued by wrestling promoters that results in the loser being rewarded by more prominent matches that make others look good. In professional wrestling, winning and losing is much more difficult to discern, and the result is the wrestling audience attempting to find an alternate way to determine victory and defeat in the genre. The question, as evidenced by the IWC discourses on wrestling, is what the variables used to assess the genre should be.

In addition to focusing on paid attendance, pay-per-view buyrates, and Nielsen ratings on the one hand, and star ratings on the other in an attempt to quantify the wrestling genre, fans also use the concept of play when discussing wrestling by "fantasy booking" wrestling narratives. Fantasy booking refers to members of the IWC speculating about the future direction of

wrestling narratives and matches, offering their own take on how they would “book” the matches if they were in control of the promotion.³⁹ Wrestling websites feature a tremendous amount of fantasy booking by members of the IWC. The forums evaluated in this chapter feature many threads and comments focused on how a fan would book the finish of the match, or what matches he or she would have at a big event. This focus on fantasy booking reveals much of the pleasure that fans take from the wrestling genre, and will be even more evident in the following chapter of this project.

Finally, the differences in the aesthetic paradigms of the IWC will be examined as a fantasy booking case study. This case study reveals how the distinctions between these two aesthetics can be collapsed, bringing together seemingly disparate parts of the IWC as they exhibit similar play processes. The case study focuses on the worked shoot promo that former ROH wrestler CM Punk gave on WWE’s *Monday Night Raw* telecast. CM Punk talked about some of the problems in WWE, breaking the fourth wall and appealing to many of the members of the IWC by discussing topics that were taboo in WWE. This angle also ignited excitement within all of the IWC, as fans of WWE talked about how exciting the storyline would be and how much revenue it would generate while ROH fans excitably talked about how proud they were of the ROH alum and how well this angle could work by telling a long, complex narrative. A tremendous number of IWC members began fantasy booking the CM Punk angle in the weeks following his promo as excitement spread throughout the IWC. This case study represents the ability of wrestling to bring together wrestling fans no matter their particular aesthetic paradigm. As we shall see, this case study focuses on the boundaries between these two sets of fans and

³⁹ The term “book” refers to the booker of a wrestling company. The booker is historically the person responsible for putting matches together and providing the finish of matches for the wrestlers. The purpose of the booker is to provide a reason for the wrestlers to want to battle in a match and pique the interest of the fans so that they will want to see the match (Matysik, 2009).

how these boundaries are indeed permeable for wrestling smarks who want to play with the genre.

Professional Wrestling or Sports Entertainment?

Vince McMahon's WWE is the largest, most profitable wrestling company in the world. Former longtime wrestling promoter Larry Matysik (2009) confirms this by boldly stating that, "World Wrestling Entertainment rules the professional wrestling landscape, worldwide. And one man rules WWE: Vince McMahon. Without question, Vince McMahon *is* professional wrestling today"(p. 7). WWE broadcasts currently air on the USA and SyFy cable networks with monthly pay-per-view events that are purchased worldwide. Vince McMahon has his own star on the Hollywood Walk-of-Fame and the WWE brand tours the globe extensively holding international events that draw large crowds. Indeed, McMahon's WWE sits atop the wrestling food chain. The irony of that statement and the praise that writers like Matysik have heaped on McMahon is that it appears McMahon desires distance from the term wrestling itself. For Matysik to state that, "Vince McMahon *is* professional wrestling today," could be interpreted as an insult to WWE and McMahon personally since the company has attempted to rebrand itself as "sports entertainment" rather than professional wrestling.

McMahon himself provided a description of sports entertainment in a 2000 *Boston Globe* article, stating that sports entertainment "treats professional wrestling as an action/adventure soap opera...the WWF presents a hybrid of almost all forms of entertainment and sports combined in one show"(Katz & Jhally, 2000). This hybrid form of professional wrestling incorporates a variety of popular culture trends and presents them within the context of a

traveling wrestling carnival. Sociologist R. Tyson Smith (2009) watched WWE programming and described WWE's version of sports entertainment in the following way: "Intricate plots are generated with aggressive monologues, tense interviews, locker room mishaps, hokey humiliations, replays of recent conflicts, and colorful commentary by two ringside announcers. In a two-hour program, little more than 20 minutes consists of actual in-ring combat"(2009, p. 66). This focus on the conventions of a variety show over actual in-ring combat is the cause of much consternation within the IWC. WWE's aversion to the term and concept of wrestling infuriates many wrestling fans.

WWE's dissociation with wrestling culminated in April 2011 when the company formally announced that it was no longer known as World Wrestling Entertainment and instead was simply WWE. In a press release entitled "The New WWE Expands Beyond Wrestling," the company announced it was rebranding itself and that "The new business model of the company better reflects what WWE is all about, being a global entertainment company."⁴⁰ Rather than being known as a wrestling company, WWE was now an entertainment company that removed the term wrestling from its brand. The company vehemently insisted that it was not a wrestling company so that it would be free of the shame associated with the genre. For example, in an episode of *Wrestling Observer Radio* with Bryan Alvarez and Dave Meltzer from July 25, 2011, Meltzer discusses how WWE hires writers from soap operas that do not know much about professional wrestling. To get a job writing for WWE's wrestling show, it is disadvantageous for an applicant to know anything about wrestling. In the July 11, 2011 issue of *The Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, Dave Meltzer reported that in an interview with Bloomberg TV on June 29,

⁴⁰ The press release was prominent on numerous websites devoted to professional wrestling and the media industry. I first accessed the release on <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/181328/WWE-Plans-To-Expand-Beyond-Wrestling.htm>.

2011, Vince McMahon clearly told the reporter that, “We are not a wrestling company, we’re an entertainment company.”

Many members of the IWC take exception to the label “sports entertainment.” At 411mania.com, the responses to WWE’s announcement that they were dropping the term wrestling from their moniker was met with a mix of disdain and support for their decision, which is consistent with the responses found on the site. For example, one respondent stated that, “Vince still hasn’t got it through his steroid-enhanced brain that nobody wants his ‘entertainment.’ He will never stretch beyond his core wrestling audience who want to see wrestling.”⁴¹ Another respondent echoed these sentiments, although without resorting to an attack on Vince McMahon personally, by stating that, “If I want wrestling, I’ll watch a wrestling company. That isn’t WWE, and that isn’t an insult.”⁴² These responses are indicative of a ROH (bourgeois) aesthetic that is not concerned with how the exchange value of wrestling may be increased from McMahon’s rebranding efforts. Instead, these responses value the genre of professional wrestling for its subjective pleasures, deriding McMahon’s decision because it undermines the genre they hold dear.

On the other hand, many responses at 411mania.com were supportive of Vince McMahon’s rebranding efforts, revealing the popular aesthetic cultivated by WWE. The reasoning from these responders seemed to be that Vince McMahon knows what he is doing and what is best for the wrestling industry. This faith in McMahon and WWE reveals a belief in the free market of capitalism, as WWE’s success in the marketplace indicates that the company’s

⁴¹ Col. (2011, April 7). WWE Plans To Expand Beyond Wrestling. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/181328/WWE-Plans-To-Expand-Beyond-Wrestling.htm>.

⁴² Steve. (2011, April 7). WWE Plans To Expand Beyond Wrestling. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/181328/WWE-Plans-To-Expand-Beyond-Wrestling.htm>.

decisions were obviously the correct ones. For example, one responder derided those critiquing McMahon by stating that, “This is called evolution people... You whine and complain so much it’s beyond ridiculous. If Vinnie Mac wants to stay in business he has to change the business model. Simple as that. Besides... we’ll be watching like the puppets we are.”⁴³ Another responder at 411mania.com addressed the need for the change, pointing to the same negative stigma of professional wrestling that WWE used to necessitate the name change. This responder stated that, “When a guy from creative tries to get work in Hollywood, Hollywood still smirks when they see wrestling on the resume... So WWE wants to expand what they do and make more money in various ventures... The reason why Vince McMahon, for all the failures and misfires, is one of the greatest American businessmen of all time is that he never stands still.”⁴⁴ These responses illustrate the tension in the IWC, as many who criticized WWE for dropping “wrestling” use the same reasoning to critique many of WWE’s decisions. At the same time, many at 411mania.com focused on how WWE needs to be a competitive business and remain at the forefront of the wrestling industry to justify the change to the genre they love.

The tension between sports entertainment and professional wrestling permeates the entirety of the IWC. At wrestlecrap.com, there is a thread on their message forum that specifically asks the question of what the difference is between the two terms. In a thread entitled “Ain’t wrestling and sports entertainment the same?,” forum members debated the distinctions between the two versions of wrestling. The discourse remained civil throughout the thread, but the site is known for being closely moderated by forum administrators with posts

⁴³ Axel Foley. (2011, April 7). WWE Plans To Expand Beyond Wrestling. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/181328/WWE-Plans-To-Expand-Beyond-Wrestling.htm>.

⁴⁴ BDC. (2011, April 7). WWE Plans To Expand Beyond Wrestling. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/181328/WWE-Plans-To-Expand-Beyond-Wrestling.htm>.

being deleted if they become too antagonistic. One eloquent response argued that the two terms were indeed the same, but took exception to the need for sports entertainment in the first place. The respondent wrote, “Why not just call it wrestling? Have you ever heard of anyone outside of WWE or TNA refer to it as sports entertainment?”⁴⁵ This response indicates a nuanced understanding of wrestling fandom, as the responder is able to address the problem with the term in relation to his fandom while not engaging in an online battle about whether wrestling or sports entertainment are the same thing. He clearly understands the rules of this online community and is still able to ask provocative questions of the need for the second moniker.

The response at the wrestlecrap.com forum differs drastically from the same question being pondered at the f4wonline.com forum, more affectionately referred to as The Board by the members of that community. One would reason that the response at wrestlecrap.com, where the absurd of wrestling is celebrated, would be more whimsical than the website run by Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez. However, in a thread on The Board entitled “Why is it called sports entertainment,” the responses by members of the f4wonline.com community are playfully antagonistic. One noteworthy response to the question in the thread bluntly states, “I want to stab you to death, and play with your blood.”⁴⁶ Rather than being seen as a direct threat, which it certainly appears to be, the response is simply ignored and the thread ends with no substantial discussion of the issue amongst members of The Board. It is almost as if the notion of discussing something that clearly matters to many in the IWC is discouraged within the playfully hostile banter on The Board.

⁴⁵ Playboy Don Douglas. (2010, June 4). Ain’t wrestling and sports entertainment the same? Message posted to <http://www.realwrestlecrap.proboards.com>

⁴⁶ allergic2light. (2010, February 10). Why is it called sports entertainment. Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=93206&hilit=sports+entertainment>

On the ROH forum, however, the distinction between professional wrestling and sports entertainment merits much discussion. Perhaps no thread on the ROH forums represents the severity of the distinction between professional wrestling and sports entertainment more than the thread where Jim Cornette, a legendary wrestling character and consultant for ROH, shared a “contract” with wrestling fans. Cornette posted this contract on his own website and it was quoted on the ROH forums. In the contract, Cornette mentions that wrestling fans have been contacting him and he states that,

“The overwhelming majority has said the same thing in a variety of ways – they want their pro wrestling back. They are sick of the sports entertainment. They are tired of the sport they love being treated as a *Saturday Night Live* sketch. They are embarrassed to admit to their friends or family that they watch wrestling nowadays, or worse yet, they have quit watching wrestling altogether.”⁴⁷

Cornette goes on to urge wrestling fans to support Ring of Honor over the sports entertainment of WWE, and promises that with their support he will get them their “wrestling” back. Some members of the ROH community echoed the sentiments of fans at online destinations like wrestlecrap.com, stating that, “No matter how much Cornette wants to holler about how much he despises ‘sports entertainment,’ the fact remains is that (sic) we watch ROH to be entertained. All professional wrestling is sports entertainment.”⁴⁸ However, the majority of the comments saw Cornette’s contract as a manifesto, virtually signing the contract to support ROH as an alternative vision to Vince McMahon’s sports entertainment. For example, one response stated that, “I know what side I’ll be on...supporting the only company who HONESTLY cares about

⁴⁷ Cornette, Jim. (2009, December 8). A Contract With The Wrestling Fans.

<http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=93206&hilit=sports+entertainment>

⁴⁸ Seagull. (2009, December 8). Cornette’s Contract With Wrestling Fans. Message posted to <http://www.rohwrestling.com/MessageBoard>

their fans and the WRESTLING that goes on inside the ring, the only company that has HONOR written in their name.”⁴⁹

The Internet Wrestling Community’s Negotiation of a Smark

Jim Cornette’s contract with wrestling fans is aimed directly to those fans who are knowledgeable about how the genre works and are simultaneously able to suspend their disbelief when watching wrestling matches. These wrestling smarks make up the audience of Ring of Honor, although there are many fans who love both WWE and ROH as well. ROH targets these wrestling smarks while WWE attempts to reach a larger, more casual audience. The premise is that there are not enough of these hardcore smart fans who follow the backstage narratives of the wrestling industry and simultaneously love wrestling matches for a company to be profitable.⁵⁰ This logic dictates that smart fans are a distinct minority within the larger subset of wrestling fandom, and for a company to be financially successful it must target a mass audience instead of the niche audience of wrestling smarks. The ROH fanbase suggests that by catering to the tastes of the smark the casual audience will follow, while the WWE fanbase argues that if targeting smarks was economically viable then ROH would be more successful. Of course, that line of reasoning presumes that the two promotions are on equal footing in the media industry, and that is most certainly not the case. WWE is a multinational, publicly traded corporation with television contracts in numerous countries around the globe while ROH, until very recently, had no television outlet and a very limited presence in international markets.

⁴⁹ TheGrahams. (2009, December 8). Cornette’s Contract With Wrestling Fans. Message posted to <http://www.rohwrestling.com/MessageBoard>

⁵⁰ Dave Meltzer examines this issue when discussing the sale of ROH to Sinclair Broadcasting Group in the July 4, 2011 issue of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*.

Ring of Honor's targeting of wrestling smarks illustrates a key tension within the IWC, just as the distinction between professional wrestling and sports entertainment does. That fans of ROH are labeled, and label themselves, wrestling smarks positions them as distinct from the casual audience of WWE. The result of this labeling is that the very term smark has been reappropriated by many in the IWC. Rather than being the amalgamation of mark and smart, which is the origin of the term, smark is often associated with "snark," referring to an attitude of superiority or sarcasm. Snark is very similar to smark (aside from replacing the "m" with an "n") in that it combines two terms – snide and remark – just as smark does with wrestling fandom – smart and mark. The issue is that many members of the IWC associate this attitude with smarks now, labeling them as elitists or snobs. The presumption is that smarks are simply interested in accumulating subcultural capital to make themselves appear superior to others in the IWC. For example, on the wrestlecrap.com forum one respondent states that there is no difference between sports entertainment and professional wrestling, and "Anybody who tries to claim otherwise is deluding themselves, usually to try to earn smark credit."⁵¹ More directly, another forum member at wrestlecrap.com describes wrestling smarks as "pretentious assholes."⁵² As we shall see, this accusation of elitism appears often within the criticism of ROH's bourgeois aesthetic in the IWC, as many feel that the search for subcultural capital is done to foster a hierarchy within the IWC.

More pressing, however, is the negotiation of the term smark by WWE and ROH fans who espouse different aesthetic paradigms. For fans who champion the WWE aesthetic, the term is very often used interchangeably with the notion of a snide remark, or snark. Any criticism of

⁵¹ Blackoutcreature. (2010, June 4). Ain't wrestling and sports entertainment the same? Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com>

⁵² KayFaban. (2011, April 13). Mark or Smark? Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com>

wrestling content, particularly in WWE, becomes an indication of snarky behavior in the IWC. For members of the IWC who espouse the WWE aesthetic, there is no difference between a wrestling smark and a smart fan, referring to a fan who is only interested in how the product is produced and sold to the masses. Members of the IWC who champion the ROH aesthetic, on the other hand, often focus on how the smark is the combination of this smart fan with the behaviors of a wrestling mark who suspends disbelief and enjoys wrestling matches. This negotiation of the term “smark” yields many intense reactions within the IWC, as fans who espouse the WWE aesthetic state that these smarks are incapable of enjoying wrestling matches and have to overanalyze every aspect of the product. For example, some feedback provided to Dave Meltzer by his readers on a WWE event featured one fan state that, “You have to be pretty smarky to bitch about that match.”⁵³ This idea of being incapable of marking out over a wrestling match is echoed at wrestlecrap.com, as one forum member states that, “I try my hardest to watch wrestling without nitpicking at little things but sometimes your (sic) just in a smarky mood, ya know?”⁵⁴ This conception of the smark as being a snarky smart fan distinguishes this practice from “normal” wrestling fandom, positioning the misunderstood smark as a deviant or exception. Smarks, from the perspective of the WWE aesthetic, are members of the IWC who subscribe to the ROH aesthetic, marking them as distinct from the masses of wrestling fandom. For example, at the wrestlecrap.com forum one member states that, “Normal people who enjoy good thing

⁵³ Beaubien, Rob. (2008, August 18). More SummerSlam feedback. Message posted to <http://www.f4wonline.com/component/content/article/80-features-and-tv-reviews/6431-more-summer-slam-feedback>

⁵⁴ kinetico. (2011, April 13). Mark or Smark? Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com>

(sic) more than complaining about bad things remember Rumble 03 for Benoit-Angle.”⁵⁵ This comment refers to the match between Kurt Angle and Chris Benoit in 2003, which was heavily praised in the IWC, which followed a horrible match between Triple H and Scott Steiner at the same event.

The smark label is constantly negotiated within the IWC, as many fans who prefer WWE’s sports entertainment prefer the WWE aesthetic that is aimed at mass audiences while fans who prefer the ROH aesthetic prefer wrestling companies like ROH, which are aimed at a more devoted fanbase of professional wrestling. Obviously, the aesthetic paradigms exhibited by fans of WWE and ROH are very distinct, and yet these fans are all part of the same subcultural entity – the IWC. The tensions between these two groups makes each group distinct and provides for the accumulation of subcultural capital while simultaneously allowing for permeable boundaries that can be crossed by wrestling fans. In this way, the IWC embodies the same notion of the wrestling smark – as the distinctions between mark and smart are able to be traversed in a manner parallel to the distinctions between fans of professional wrestling and sports entertainment.

WWE’s Popular Aesthetic - Does it Draw?

The aesthetic paradigm of those in the IWC who champion the WWE and its model of sports entertainment can be summarized with this question: “Does it draw?”(Matysik, 2009).

This question summarily refers to how much revenue the company generates, a very quantified

⁵⁵ truewrestlingfan. (2010, November 14). I watched Vengeance 2003 last night. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=WWE&action=display&thread=329087>

conception of determining value for a media product. This question essentially fetishizes the exchange value of WWE texts, revealing the popular aesthetic of WWE fans. Of course, “drawing” can refer to quantifiers such as Nielsen ratings, attendance figures, pay-per-view buyrates, merchandise sales, and website traffic; all of which are not equal in terms of generating revenue. For example, a person purchasing a WWE pay-per-view event at \$44.95 generates much more revenue for the wrestling promotion than one watching the television programming on Monday or Friday evenings for free, especially if you are not a member of the Nielsen audience.⁵⁶ What members of the IWC seem to value most is whichever indicator is highest in a given moment, as when ratings are down fans will often point to attendance at house shows being up to compensate for a perceived decline in exchange value. These numbers are significant, however, for members of the IWC who attempt to quantify the company’s successes or failures in the marketplace. This emphasis on the industry and how a wrestling company does has roots with wrestling journalists like Dave Meltzer, as his *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* covers the wrestling industry from the perspective of how the programming and attendance figures correlate to the wrestling business (Matysik, 2009). In addition, Meltzer also rates the aesthetic quality of particular wrestling matches in his newsletter, serving both sides of the IWC debate about how to determine value – via business indicators or aesthetic quality.

In addition to wrestling journalists such as Meltzer, wrestlers themselves often state that the key to determining success in the wrestling industry is how much money a wrestler makes. For example, legendary wrestler Dory Funk is quoted in Meltzer’s September 8, 2010 edition of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* saying, “To me, the main criteria for being a successful pro

⁵⁶ Calculating precise revenue for each pay-per-view purchase is tricky as WWE must split the revenue generated with cable and satellite providers. In addition, the pay-per-view events are priced differently in different countries, meaning that each pay-per-view purchase does not yield the same profit for WWE (Meltzer, 2010).

wrestler is if you drew at the box office, if you had the respect of the wrestlers and the fans, and if you made money.” While respect of wrestlers and fans may be harder to ascertain, how much money a wrestler made for himself and his wrestling organization is more discernible. And Dory Funk is not alone in using this popular aesthetic, as on the May 6, 2010 edition of *Figure Four Daily*, Alvarez quotes wrestler Kevin Nash who states that, “It’s a business, I’m here to make some money.” Members of the IWC hear wrestlers state over and over that the final determination of success is how much money the wrestlers made in their careers, and as knowledgeable fans they assume the same fetishization of exchange value when determining the value of a wrestling company. With the wrestling industry currently operating in a near-monopoly state with WWE at the top, this reasoning positions WWE as the best wrestling promotion in the world. As Larry Matysik (2009) states, “Hardcore followers can critique McMahon’s booking up and down, but it doesn’t change one fact: he must have made plenty of good decisions about talent, and other issues as well. Vince is the one with all those zeroes in his bank account”(p. 131). This sort of bottom-line justification is then adopted by the IWC, especially when defending mainstream wrestling promotions from their critics. For example, former WWE wrestler Lance Storm offered some criticism of the current wrestling landscape, and on 411mania.com there were responses such as, “Dear Lance Storm, Go draw some money in your career and/or cut a promo that people actually remember. Then we’ll talk.”⁵⁷ Even a celebrated wrestler like Lance Storm, who is praised for the quality of his matches by many in the IWC, has his opinion challenged based on how much money he drew during his career.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ JJ’s Guitar. (2010, February 27). Lance Storm On Mr. Anderson’s Promo. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/131189>

⁵⁸ Success once again being a relative term, as Lance Storm competed in various wrestling promotions (including WWE) and had a nearly two-decade long career. However, he was never

The focus on “drawing” permeates the popular aesthetic that the IWC uses to praise WWE and sports entertainment. As mentioned above, WWE is the most profitable wrestling company in the world as of 2011. According to Dave Meltzer in the February 23, 2011 edition of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, “For the year as a whole the company beat the profit levels of the past two years, taking in \$477,655,000 this year and ending with \$53,452,000 in profits, largely due to government tax breaks and cost cutting throughout the year.” Clearly WWE, drawing almost five hundred million dollars in revenue and over fifty million dollars in profits, is an enormous corporation with significant economic muscle. Other wrestling companies are not in the same league as WWE in terms of economic capital, which according to this criteria clearly positions WWE as the “major league” of the wrestling industry.

The chart in Appendix I, taken from the February 23, 2011 issue of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, breaks down the diverse revenue streams for WWE, including the percentages of how each revenue stream contributes to the company’s bottom line. In 2010, the highest revenue generator for WWE was the company’s television rights fees and television advertising. This revenue stream refers to the deals that WWE has with NBCUniversal Media, LLC to air its programming on the USA and SyFy cable networks, as well as product placement advertising on the television shows that WWE works out with individual sponsors.⁵⁹ Other than TNA, which appears on the Spike cable network, no other wrestling organization has such an immense television presence, removing that revenue stream from other wrestling organizations. This television presence contributes to WWE’s second highest revenue generator, as arena

the most featured performer in WWE, and is being judged by his lack of prominence within that company.

⁵⁹ The press release from WWE regarding airing *Friday Night Smackdown* on the SyFy network can be found at http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2010/2010_04_13.jsp. The press release on WWE’s relationship with NBCUniversal Media LLC’s USA network, which airs *Monday Night Raw*, can be found at http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2009/2009_11_16_2-.jsp.

events in 2010 benefit greatly from WWE's television programs that feature their current batch of stars each week. Audiences do not get to see the performers from other wrestling organizations like ROH each week on television, meaning that their live events draw significantly fewer fans than WWE events.

WWE also generates much of its revenue from its pay-per-view events, which are carried by all cable and satellite providers in the United States and many more worldwide. ROH, on the other hand, holds a few internet pay-per-view events each year, and these generate significantly less revenue than WWE's events. For example, the most purchased ROH internet pay-per-view event, entitled *Best in the World* on June 26, 2011, was reportedly purchased by 2,100 fans according to Meltzer's July 4, 2011 edition of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. According to Meltzer, "2,100 people ordering the show worldwide only adds about \$15,700 in revenue to the promotion because Go Fight Live takes half."⁶⁰ Comparing this event, which is ROH's most successful event to date, with the buyrates of WWE's pay-per-view events listed in Appendix II demonstrates that WWE is generating significantly more pay-per-view revenue than ROH. However, the information in Appendix II, taken from Dave Meltzer's February 23, 2011 issue of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, also indicates that WWE is selling substantially fewer pay-per-views than they did in the past. While they are still higher than any other wrestling organization, the loss of so much pay-per-view revenue indicates that something is assuredly not working in their product when using the same criteria to position the company as the only wrestling organization that matters. Many members of the IWC and wrestling journalists point to the rise of UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) in the pay-per-view arena as the cause for WWE's pay-per-view decline, as many of WWE's former customers have moved on to the

⁶⁰ Go Fight Live is the company that hosts the pay-per-view event online and receives a percentage of the event's revenue.

mixed-martial-arts genre. Others, as we shall see, point to deficiencies in the WWE product as the reason for the company's pay-per-view decline.

Because of WWE's enormous amount of revenue and visibility, many in the IWC argue that WWE is the only major league of professional wrestling. For example, at f4wonline.com's The Board, one forum member was ruminating on the success of former ROH performer Bryan Danielson (known in WWE as Daniel Bryan) during his WWE tenure by stating that, "a guy you followed from the beginning finally makes it in the big league and you expect nothing but great things."⁶¹ WWE is the goal in the estimation of this member of the IWC, and Bryan Danielson's talents have afforded him an opportunity in the "big league" of the wrestling industry. This mindset of WWE being the only significant wrestling organization in the world is echoed by a commenter at 411Mania.com, who states that,

"everyone who has gotten into pro wrestling in the past 20 years has the dream of being wwe champion. it is the premier organization in the world for wrestling. if you try to deny that you are just being an elitist douche. I'll admit some of the things the E has done recently have been a bit puzzling, but they are still the top dogs with the best talent."⁶²

Once again, WWE is positioned as the destination for all aspiring professional wrestlers, making it the only significant wrestling entity in the industry. This fan even addresses the decision-making process within WWE but reasons that it is not his place to question their choices given their stature in the wrestling industry. To do so would be to question the marketplace itself, as WWE's prominence is demonstrative of their record of correct decision-making. And for anyone to use another aesthetic paradigm to examine the wrestling landscape, and subsequently

⁶¹ Calypso320. (2010, January 19). Daniel Bryan's WWE Run. Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=128443&p=3114788&hilit=WWE+big+league#p3114788>

⁶² dan. (2009, August 14). 411's Buy or Sell 8.14.09. Message posted to <http://411mania.com/wrestling/columns/113334/>

the free market capitalism that has yielded WWE's success, would make them the equivalent of "an elitist douche" from the perspective of the WWE aesthetic.

The significance of WWE also manifests itself in the discourse of professional wrestlers. For example, in 2010, ROH wrestler Tyler Black signed a deal with WWE and agreed to leave ROH. In an article in *The Sun*, Black discussed his decision to leave ROH for WWE by stating that, "To be honest, and no disrespect meant, but it wasn't a hard decision to make. You have to want to test yourself against the best and WWE is the pinnacle of our industry."⁶³ Tyler Black's decision to join WWE parallels the words of wrestling fans who favor the WWE aesthetic, focusing on how wrestlers can make the most money working for the WWE. Tyler Black himself alluded to this in an interview several months before his decision to leave ROH, stating on Bryan Alvarez's June 15, 2010 edition of *Figure Four Daily* that, "All of us would love to stay with ROH and make a ton of money...but it's a long road...the money (in WWE) is just too good. We don't have retirement plans, 401Ks, pensions, whatever." Here is an example of a wrestler who states that he would love to stay with ROH and the ROH model of presenting professional wrestling, but the lure of economic compensation for his labor is too great with WWE. This economic compensation is used repeatedly by members of the IWC who support WWE as evidence of WWE's hierarchical superiority within the wrestling industry.

Tyler Black's ROH departure is an excellent example of fans using the same reasoning as the wrestler to justify Black's decision. Even on the ROH forum, where presumably the news of Black's defection would be met with the most hostility, the fans equally fetishized the exchange value of Black's labor and focused on Black making a healthy living to assuage their own disappointment with his impending departure. One fan wrote that, "I'm happy he's going to

⁶³ McNichol, Rob. (2010, September 11). Joining WWE was easy choice. *The Sun*. <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/sport/wrestling/3133781/>

WWE...he deserves a better payday.’’⁶⁴ Another poster echoed this sentiment stating that, “ROH is an awesome wrestling promotion but the fact is they can’t pay guys as well as WWE can. At the end of the day this is a business and in this business, like any business, you go where the most money is if you can.”⁶⁵ By fetishizing exchange value and privileging the WWE aesthetic, WWE is easily positioned as the logical destination for a wrestler like Tyler Black, as it is the only place where he will be fairly compensated for his labor. As one member of the ROH forum states, “WWE is bar none, the top of the line in pro wrestling. Whether people like the product or not doesn’t matter. It’s the best place to make a comfortable living in this industry.”⁶⁶

However, this focus on solely the economic capital available in WWE can lead to creative frustration with the wrestlers and fans, especially within the paradigm of a bourgeois aesthetic. Dave Meltzer, in the April 28, 2010 edition of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, states that,

“In WWE, a significant percentage are frustrated, but they deal with it because they believe it’s better being there making good money and being a somebody than not being there...That’s the wrestling business. You learn to shut your mouth, look on the bright side and be happy you at least have a job because some very talented people right now don’t. You work to not let it emotionally get to you and take the check. But that mentality kills passion, drive and creativity.”

Meltzer’s quote illustrates the conflict for many in the wrestling industry, as WWE is the place to make a decent living but it often is accompanied by creative frustration for the performers.

⁶⁴ jvitolo. (2010, August 8). Tyler Black. Message posted to <http://rohwrestling.com/forum/index.php?topic=1879.75>

⁶⁵ Lazyking. (2010, August 8). Tyler Black. Message posted to <http://rohwrestling.com/forum/index.php?topic=1879.75>

⁶⁶ Russ. (2010, August 8). Tyler Black. Message posted to <http://rohwrestling.com/forum/index.php?topic=1879.75>

Many members of the IWC also contend that because WWE does not push the most qualified wrestlers on their roster, the product suffers. For example, one fan states that WWE fans must “like to see matches that are slow-paced and watered down.”⁶⁷ Meltzer himself echoes these comments by stating in the August 9, 2010 issue of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* that aside from a select few WWE wrestlers, “Every one else is out working a match like they are performing in a play before an audience.” For Meltzer and ROH fans, a good match is when the audience is able to suspend disbelief and believe that these performers are in a real fight, to essentially mark out. By pushing wrestlers that are not skilled at facilitating this suspension of disbelief, it appears to be an elaborate performance instead of a fight. And this is incompatible with creating the necessary connection to the programs to build pay-per-view buyrates and house show attendance.⁶⁸ Gary Mehaffy, in a column on the f4wonline.com website, echoed these desires from the IWC by doing a survey amongst wrestling fans about who they wanted to see pushed on WWE programming. Although certainly not a scientific survey, the results unsurprisingly indicated that fans want to see people pushed who can “ACTUALLY WRESTLE.”⁶⁹ These fans want to see those who excel in their craft rewarded with spots at the top of the card, as opposed to some of the bodybuilders and manufactured stars that often dominate WWE programming.

In addition to the importance placed on revenue, another feature of the popular aesthetic in WWE programming can be found in the privileging of the spectacle. This notion of spectacle manifests in several contexts, including the “larger-than-life” characters of WWE, the hyper-

⁶⁷ giver123. (2010, March 1). 411’s Wrestler of the Week 03.01.10. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/131305/>

⁶⁸ This is why many former wrestling fans have flocked to UFC, as mixed-martial-arts has capitalized on presenting matches that will settle conflicts between fighters.

⁶⁹ Mehaffy, Gary. (2010). WWE Fan Response survey results. Retrieved from <http://www.f4wonline.com/component/content/article/17836/>

masculine/feminine bodies of the performers in WWE, and the extravagant production values in WWE programming. Fans of WWE claim that being a good wrestler requires more than simply being able to perform a believable match in the ring. Rather than being only about the performance of wrestling maneuvers, these members of the IWC contend that things like character, charisma, and interview ability count just as much, if not more than, what fans call a wrestler's "workrate." For example, after Tyler Black had left ROH for WWE, fans on the ROH forum were discussing how he would fit in with WWE's roster of performers. One fan popped into the discussion and claimed that, "John Cena is 10 times the wrestler Tyler Black is," referring to WWE's top star (Cena) who is often criticized for not having realistic matches.⁷⁰ The debate immediately switched to Cena's "storytelling" ability and how that matters more than how well he can perform certain wrestling maneuvers in the ring. On the 411Mania.com site, one post made the same argument with performers from several years ago. Dripping with sarcasm, the poster compared wrestling megastar Hulk Hogan to Dean Malenko, a small wrestler who was very skilled in the ring but who never achieved the level of superstardom of Hogan, by stating that, "Yes, because everyone knows the amount of moves you do trumps charisma, portraying your character well, and everything else. That's why Malenko was always in the main event and why Hogan never amounted to much."⁷¹

That there is more to wrestling than the performance of wrestling maneuvers during a match extends to the physical attributes of the wrestlers as well. The bodies of performers in WWE become part of the spectacle, excessive displays of masculine and feminine traits. In

⁷⁰ Dog. (2010, November 29). A moment of deluded hope (this is a fact free thread!). Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?PHPSESSID=k7tb9jd8epeqfj93qc18stq5d1&topic=2918.0>

⁷¹ Guest#7930. (2009, July 5). For the Record 7.05.09: Raw's Greatness. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/109078/>

WWE, many of the performers have chiseled physiques and there is a great emphasis on size and standing out from a crowd. This focus on the body and size is echoed by many fans of WWE, as they point to the physical stature of many of the WWE performers over their ability to perform intricate wrestling maneuvers in the ring. For example, on The Board one forum member states that, “I don’t give a fuck (Well, not mach (sic) of one) about the little guys who flippity-flop all over the place and earn kudos, and stars for it...If I wanted to see this, I’d watch gymnasts. I believe, for the most part, wrestlers should be larger than life.”⁷² This critique of non-WWE wrestling is common for members of the IWC, as WWE has historically featured larger performers with hypermasculine physiques. It takes a significant investment of economic capital to achieve that physique, and independent wrestlers often simply cannot afford the necessary chemicals to manipulate their body in such a manner (and some obviously refuse to take these chemicals as well). This popular aesthetic privileges what makes WWE distinct in the wrestling landscape, and all deviations from the WWE mold are sources of derision for many in the IWC.

The WWE’s reliance on spectacle positions the experience of the promotion as more than simply wrestling, it is a theatrical experience with superb production values. Dave Meltzer actually credits the increase in the importance of production values to the competition between WWE (then known as the WWF) and WCW (World Championship Wrestling) in the nineties, stating in the September 9, 2009 *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* that,

“With the barriers of entry so expensive, partially because the bar for television was raised by WCW years earlier with the creation of *Nitro*, and Vince McMahon and WWE put down the chips to compete, it created expectations from the masses of what they wanted a pro wrestling television show to be. It killed any chance of a strong second promotion without tens of millions earmarked for start-up, and reduced the number of jobs for wrestlers in the industry to its lowest point since before the invention of television, if not longer.”

⁷² Johnny_Shear. (2010, March 15). Weird dude shooting on Dave Meltzer and his 5 star system. Message posted to <http://forum.f4wonline.com/bb/viewtopic.php?t=95095>

With WWE purchasing WCW in 2001, it essentially removed the presence of any wrestling company being able to compete with the high production values that fans came to expect from a wrestling company. Small organizations like ROH simply cannot afford to present a show with the expensive light shows, stage, and pyrotechnics of WWE broadcasts, and fans take notice of WWE's superiority in the production values. For example, on wrestlecrap.com one fan states that, "We all know their (WWE) television production is top notch,"⁷³ while on 411Mania.com a fan states, "Give the devil (Vince McMahon) his due, he's right about the production value. Look at an NBA basketball game, a boxing or MMA event, the Iron Chef – the producers of those things should have to pay VKM (Vincent Kennedy McMahon) royalties."⁷⁴ McMahon himself boasts in a 2011 *Los Angeles Times* article that, "No one does television production better than we do."

The result of this focus on production values is that the wrestling industry, and many of its fans, equates high production values with quality in the wrestling genre. Dave Meltzer, in the July 12, 2010 edition of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* states that, "It's a very different marketplace than even five years ago, and completely different from ten to fifteen years ago, when it became all about production values and star power and major league brand." Now WWE has moved beyond being only a wrestling promotion, and according to their public relations department they are not even a wrestling company any more. As one member of the IWC states regarding their name change from World Wrestling Entertainment to only WWE, "I can understand why they would do this, as they have branched into other forms of media – WWE

⁷³ Robbymac. (2011, April 7). WWE "Beyond Wrestling," HHH head of Talent Dv'ment. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=WWE&a>

⁷⁴ Jon. (2011, April 7). Vince McMahon Discusses WWE Re-Branding, WWE Production, More. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/181318/>

Films, WWE Books, and will soon be launching a cable network, so really it does make sense from a practical point of view.”⁷⁵ By extending beyond the realm of professional wrestling, the popular aesthetic that privileges the surface or spectacle shifts the discussion away from use value and fetishizes exchange value. This shift positions WWE at the top of the wrestling hierarchy, at least in the framework posited in this section by some members of the IWC. ROH fans use very different notions of value to determine the significance of their promotion, and when WWE is examined according to that criteria, there are many shortcomings leveled by members of the IWC who prefer the version of wrestling offered by ROH.

This focus on the spectacle results in criticism from those in the IWC who champion the ROH aesthetic, and this criticism can be summarized by the phrase “Nothing Matters.” Many followers of the wrestling industry like Bryan Alvarez, Dave Meltzer, and Todd Martin repeatedly state that WWE’s vision of sports entertainment has aesthetic flaws that repeatedly tells the audience that nothing on the show matters. This criticism recalls the importance of Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) notion of “meaningful play,” as well as Geertz’ (1973) concept of “deep play” since these critics lament that loss of connection they feel with the characters and matches in WWE programming. Lance Storm, a former WWE wrestler who is now retired and appears biweekly on Alvarez’s podcasts, said on the June 10, 2010 episode of *Figure Four Daily* that, “it all just seems to be a whim...none of this shit matters...when a dance contest is as important as a wrestling match you make your entire product a joke.” In this interview, Storm yearns for wrestling matches to be treated seriously. The premise is that for an audience to get emotionally invested in characters, they have to feel that something is important or significant. The matches have to mean something, to the extent of making the audience care who actually

⁷⁵ Rorster. (2011, April 1). Various News: WWE Name Change, Awesome Kong in Atlanta, More. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/180658/>

wins or loses, if this audience will become invested enough to purchase a pay-per-view event or buy a ticket to an event. For these critics of WWE's product, they repeatedly argue that nothing matters, which is why their pay-per-view buyrates are plummeting (as seen in Appendix II).

This notion of making wrestling matter includes both the presentation or context of a wrestling event and the matches themselves. The events have to sell the audience on the importance of a match so that those members of the audience may want to buy the pay-per-view or go to the next event. And the wrestlers have to sell the maneuvers in the match to convince the audience that what is happening in the ring is authentic, that there really is something at stake in the match for the participants (Barthes, 1957), recalling the rhetoric of play as fate from Sutton-Smith in the previous chapter. On the October 6 edition of the *Bryan and Vinny Show* podcast, Alvarez states that, "No one gives a fuck about wrestling...people today are watching a cartoon...this is why people don't care," referring to a wrestler in WWE getting up moments after receiving a devastating maneuver on the cement outside of the ring. This lack of selling the effects of the maneuver communicates that what is happening in the ring does not matter, it isn't real or does not have real consequences. In addition to issues in the match, many members of the IWC point to how WWE presents its programming as the main reason why nothing matters to many wrestling fans. Todd Martin discusses how WWE features matches on television with inconclusive finishes, thus sabotaging the company's potential to make money. He states,

"I just don't buy that in 2010 crap finishes help build PPV matches. They've been done way too frequently for way too long and they just make matches feel pointless...WWE is essentially like a really stupid con man running a shell game. He offers you a free try, only he rigs it so you lose. Then he tries to get you to play again, only this time for \$45, and says this time he's going to play fair. This is not a very profitable con job."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Martin, Todd. (2010, February 15). Todd Martin's Raw Report 2-15-10. Retrieved from http://toddmartin.blogspot.com/2010_02_01_archive.html

Even with the company making money, Martin extols the danger of taking their audience for granted, forecasting that eventually they will grow tired of this constant “con job.” Withholding a finish to a wrestling match from the audience has been done historically, but only under the context of the finish meaning something to that audience. When a wrestler does not seem to care that he or she wins or loses a match, the audience subsequently is instructed that they should not care either. One fan on 411mania.com stated that, “their (WWE) television programming is hitting new lows in terms of quality...they have championship belts that even they themselves don’t care about.”⁷⁷ Another fan on The Board, referring to *WrestleMania* in 2011, stated that, “Other than the yearly Undertaker match, nothing on the card matters.”⁷⁸ Todd Martin summarizes the concerns of the IWC by stating that, “this is just a ridiculous joke show you can’t take seriously...It comes across like the writers are just making fun of their own show, and if you have no respect for your own product why should we? And why would we possibly shell out money for your PPV Sunday?”⁷⁹

These criticisms of WWE’s programming that insist that nothing matters in WWE narratives are consistent with the aesthetic paradigm of ROH fans, which focuses primarily on aesthetics and match ratings. These ROH fans insist that WWE programming is inferior because nothing matters regarding the matches themselves. These ROH fans also lament who WWE decides to push to their main events, as these fans often argue that WWE’s chosen top performers are not deserving of their privileged position. John Cena, WWE’s top star, is perhaps

⁷⁷ Beans. (2010, May 5). 411 Facto or Fiction 5.06.10. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/138158/>

⁷⁸ junkmaildog. (2011, April 21). One of the problems with WrestleMania. Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=123638&p=2901114&hilit=nothing+matters#p2901114>

⁷⁹ Martin, Todd. (2010, September 27). Todd Martin’s Raw is Taped Hell in a Cell go-home show report for September 27. Retrieved from <http://www.f4wonline.com/content/view/17712/>

the prime example of this, as many members of the IWC contend that Cena cannot work a believable match and is very clumsy in the ring. For example, one fan on the wrestlecrap.com forum describes Cena by saying, “His moveset is very pedestrian...it is the worst looking suplex I can think of...he (sic) inability to sell. That really started pissing people off...Cena gets worked over and then pops up smiling to the crowd. It kills all psychology.”⁸⁰ Many fans feel that despite Cena’s shortcomings in the ring, he has been handpicked to be the top star in the company over more deserving performers. The reason for his selection, from the perspective of these fans, is because of his hyper-masculine body, a human spectacle of excess that McMahon apparently feels can arrest a casual viewing audience for his product. And as opposed to ROH, where fans support the company because of its perceived quality, these same fans feel that those they want to support are not being given the best opportunities to succeed. Of course, there is also an aesthetic appeal of the spectacle, as it must be engaging enough to attract casual television audiences to WWE’s product. And just as a showman like P.T. Barnum is celebrated, WWE’s Vince McMahon has also proven to be an excellent salesman who can attract mass audiences to his wrestling spectacles.

This focus on the spectacle is designed to attract a mass audience to WWE texts. Many IWC members within this popular aesthetic pointed to this focus on mass audiences when WWE announced it was dropping the word “wrestling” from its name, as well as forbidding the word from being mentioned on its television programming. This sparked outrage from many in the IWC, as wrestling was something to be celebrated rather than avoided or deemphasized. However, many also supported WWE’s decision based on their stature in the wrestling industry.

⁸⁰ Wrestimist. (2011, February 28). John Cena 2006-2007. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi?action=display&board=WWE&thread=352521&page=1>

For example, one response at 411Mania.com claimed that, “WWE can call themselves whatever they want...WWE can get away with calling themselves whatever they want because WWE is number 1.”⁸¹ WWE’s significance in the wrestling industry provides them the right, according to this fan, to alter the name of the entire industry. In response to those who criticized the decisions of WWE, one fan stated that, “It’s because of the idiotic IWC folks that Vince McMahon is trying to move away from the ‘rasslin’ perception.”⁸² This rhetorical strategy of blaming the IWC, which this poster seems to believe he is distinct from despite posting the message on an internet site devoted to wrestling, for the decisions of WWE illustrates the contentious relationship between WWE and many of professional wrestling’s most ardent fans. For example, a fan at 411Mania.com states that, “who cares what the mighty iwc kids think...wwe is on the top of this industry and will be for years to come.”⁸³

Many members of the IWC are confused, however, by WWE’s aversion to the term wrestling. One fan stated the following on 411mania.com: “Shakes head. Why is wrestling such a bad thing in WWE’s eyes?”⁸⁴ Jim Cornette identified WWE’s distaste for professional wrestling years before with his contract for wrestling fans (mentioned previously in this chapter). He stated on a December 9, 2009 edition of *Wrestling Observer Radio* that Vince McMahon was ashamed of wrestling and had no respect for the wrestling business. Because he did not respect the history of the wrestling business, he was trying to change the business into something else entirely. By extrapolating this contention further to its extreme conclusion, one fan on

⁸¹ Guest#9209. (2011, April 6). Wrestling – Your News, My Views 4.06.11. Message posted to <http://411mania.com/wrestling/columns/181086/>

⁸² JR. (2011, April 6). Wrestling – Your News, My Views 4.06.11. Message posted to <http://411mania.com/wrestling/columns/181086/>

⁸³ Guest#1667. (2009, June 22). 411’s WWE Raw Report 06.22.09. Message posted to http://411mania.com/wrestling/tv_reports/108069

⁸⁴ SeanWrestling. (2011, April 2). Various News_WWE Name Change, Awesome Kong in Atlanta, More. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/180658/>

411mania.com offered the following: “It’s only a matter of time before an episode of *Raw* features zero matches.”⁸⁵ This prospect, and WWE’s general contempt for wrestling, infuriated many in the IWC. There was considerable anger in the days following the announcement that WWE no longer stood for World Wrestling Entertainment. For example, one fan stated in an address to Vince McMahon that, “The only reason you have enough money to make crappy movies and run terrible campaigns is because WRESTLING FANS have given their hard earned money to you. WRESTLING FANS ASSHOLE MCMAHON!!!!”⁸⁶

There were also more reasoned responses to WWE’s decision to rebrand itself as something more than just wrestling. One fan stated that, “I’ll always expect Vince McMahon to try and say that he’s bigger than wrestling, but for him to try and exclude these words, and wrestling as a whole, for the sake of his ego will only lead to bad business.”⁸⁷ The most cogent and reasoned response came from a columnist on 411mania.com’s site named Larry Csonka. Csonka stated that,

“I also feel that by doing this and trying to grow their fan base, that they are alienating much of their audience...I personally dislike the fact that they are trying to de-wrestling wrestling...A while ago the company ran a campaign called ‘Stand Up For WWE.’ They wanted people to stand up for the company, defend their love of the company, and that sort of thing. But to me, why would I stand up for a company that doesn’t want to stand up for me?”⁸⁸

Csonka’s rationale was mirrored across the IWC by many wrestling fans. These members of the IWC privilege content and assign value based on a wrestling company targeting their interests.

⁸⁵ Guest#9324. (2011, April 6). Wrestling – Your News, My Views 4.06.11. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/181086>

⁸⁶ Guest#3859. (2011, April 1). Various News_WWE Name Change, Awesome Kong in Atlanta, More. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/180658/>

⁸⁷ *Asterisk*. (2011, April 6). Wrestling – Your News, My Views 4.06.11. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/181086>

⁸⁸ Csonka, Larry. (2011, April 6). Wrestling – Your News, My Views 4.06.11. Retrieved from <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/181086>

WWE's dismissal of wrestling was, to them, a slap in the face. WWE's embarrassment of wrestling was taken as a slight by these fans, and after they had supported the company they could not help but take it personally. Had these fans embraced the WWE aesthetic then perhaps this rebranding would not have been so insulting.

The rebranding of WWE, and the company's general targeting of media consumers who are not necessarily wrestling fans, illustrates another issue members of the IWC have with WWE – that the company does not care about wrestling fans. More than just their aversion to the wrestling genre, many in the IWC contend that WWE actively antagonizes wrestling fans. In 2010, when former ROH champion Bryan Danielson debuted on WWE's *NXT* program as Daniel Bryan, announcer Michael Cole began to say derogatory things about him on the air. This infuriated many in the IWC who were fans of ROH and Bryan/Danielson and was presumably done to express the company's frustration with these fans who valued performers outside of WWE's diegesis. Many IWC members began arguing about why WWE would want to antagonize the base audience for their product – wrestling fans. One fan on wrestlecrap.com theorized that,

“We are now the enemy because we disagree with Vince, a lot of us don't like Cena, a lot of us don't like the way WWE books things. Vince doesn't like us, because he can't control us. But in this instance he took an internet hero, a wrestler we all love that Vincent K. McMahon Jr. did not create...It bothers him and sickens him...So he makes him look like a loser.”⁸⁹

The *NXT* program, which was eventually canceled by SyFy and now runs on the WWE website and some foreign markets, received tremendous criticism from members of the IWC both for how it portrayed some IWC favorites like Bryan Danielson and for its content, which many argued was synonymous with WWE's poor vision of what wrestling should be. Todd Martin, a

⁸⁹ corndog. (2010, May 12). Question for the IWC, re: Bryan Danielson. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi?board>

columnist on the f4wonline.com website, wrote about WWE content stating that, “It’s crappy writing predicated on the audience being too stupid to notice or too accustomed to no logic in wrestling to care.”⁹⁰ This lack of care put into WWE’s product is, according to Todd Martin, due to the company’s disdain for wrestling fans, presuming they are incapable of deciphering quality from any sort of wrestling programming. This perceived derisive attitude toward wrestling fans who favor the ROH aesthetic results in many in the IWC critiquing WWE and looking for alternatives to their product.

Martin’s assertion that WWE conceptualizes its audience as being “too stupid” to notice internal logic gaps in the company’s programming is echoed by Bryan Alvarez. Alvarez, in the May 17, 2011 edition of his *Figure Four Weekly* newsletter, labeled the current wrestling product produced by mainstream (WWE and TNA) wrestling companies as “anti-intellectual.”

Alvarez states that,

“Ironically, the anti-intellectualism that we see with WWE today is probably tied to Vince McMahon’s growing anti-wrestling stance...Being a hardcore wrestling fan was actually a DETRIMENT to you if you were trying to get hired to work for WWE, a concept that would be mind-boggling to your average person. ‘If you know the subject matter,’ Vince McMahon essentially said, ‘you are unqualified for this job.’ So instead of people who understand wrestling writing wrestling, the majority of them don’t understand wrestling and so they’re creating a product that is quite alien to fans who have followed wrestling for years.”

For WWE, he suggests, wrestling fans are considered too stupid to notice any flaws with their content, but the result is that for many members of the IWC, the flaws in WWE content result in the product being “anti-intellectual,” or riddled with logic gaps and continuity errors that would stand out to fans in other media environments. This condemnation of wrestling fans who favor

⁹⁰ Martin, Todd. (2010, June 22). WWE *Raw* is *NXT* Report. Retrieved from <http://www.f4wonline.com/content/view/13822/>

the WWE aesthetic is a common critique of the mass audience, referring to the targeting of the “lowest common denominator” in mass produced media texts like WWE.

By aiming at mass audiences and a popular aesthetic, many members of the IWC accuse WWE of dumbing down their product and homogenizing the wrestling landscape. On the April 4, 2010 edition of the *Wrestling Weekly* podcast, host Les Thatcher states that corporate wrestling has taken all the “individuality” out of the business. Unlike in ROH, where their independence allows for a level of improvisation and innovation, many in the IWC contend that WWE has homogenized professional wrestling. Former WWE writer, Court Bauer, on the July 21 edition of *Wrestling Observer Radio*, provides the same conclusion as Thatcher but from his own personal experience with the company serving as his evidence, stating that WWE is making all of its performers homogenous. A member of The Board goes so far as to say that Florida Championship Wrestling, which is WWE’s developmental territory where they train future performers, “is becoming a legit clone factory.”⁹¹ Rather than seek a diverse array of talent, WWE instead seems to recruit models and bodybuilders that they intend to teach to wrestle in their developmental territory, which angers the IWC as mentioned above.

The result of this homogenization of professional wrestling for those in the IWC who prefer the ROH aesthetic is that the WWE product feels stale and sanitized so as to not offend or dissuade any potential audience member. In a column on the f4wonline.com website, Kevin Kindelberger states that WWE matches “are the same thing over and over, no variation, and if there is it is rare or saved for a PPV and the matches are relatively the same. I can write down what I am going to see in ninety percent of WWE matches and it is a shame as it needs some

⁹¹ RM123. (2011, March 31). WTF. Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=126894>

variety.”⁹² Todd Martin echoes these sentiments, stating that, “WWE programming long ago lost the feeling of reality and unpredictability. The promos all sound the same. The matches are all the same. The booking is the same and there’s a very tightly defined formula for what happens. It doesn’t feel like any of the wrestlers have individual agency; they’re just doing what they’re told.”⁹³ Dave Meltzer, on the August 11, 2011 edition of *Wrestling Observer Radio*, goes so far as to call WWE wrestlers “assembly line workers” given how homogenous the product has become. The members of the IWC who fetishize the use value of professional wrestling take great exception to the aesthetic compromises that WWE has made to reach this mythical casual audience. This sanitized version of professional wrestling causes these members of the IWC great consternation, and the result is that WWE is the target of much venom within the IWC.

ROH’s Bourgeois Aesthetic – Star Ratings and Use Value

Rather than focus on the exchange value of wrestling content, ROH fans within the IWC focus on the use value of the matches at ROH events. ROH holds events that are recorded and made available to wrestling fans via the company’s website.⁹⁴ These recordings of non-televised events allow for ROH to feature longer matches with no commercial interruption, something WWE has to account for in their television programming (but not pay-per-view events). The

⁹² Kindelberger, Kevin. 2010. Kevin Kindelberger complains TNA not getting its fair shake. Retrieved from <http://www.f4wonline.com/content/view/14264/>

⁹³ Martin, Todd. (2011, June 28). Todd Martin’s Raw Report 6-28-11. Retrieved from <http://www.f4wonline.com/more/more-top-stories/3-news/21166-ww-e-raw-report-by-todd-martin>

⁹⁴ Ring of Honor has also experimented with other types of distribution methods, including pay-per-view events where the company tapes shows and makes them available via pay-per-view on a several month delay, internet pay-per-view (which the company still employs), and television (a limited run on HDNet, which is only available in limited homes in the United State). The company will soon air on the Sinclair Broadcast Group’s stations in thirty-five markets in the United States.

longer matches in ROH also feature an athletic, hard-hitting style that facilitates the suspension of disbelief of wrestling smarks, allowing them to mark out during these competitive matches. The bourgeois aesthetic used by ROH fans in the IWC centers on this focus on the aesthetics of the wrestling matches rather than the production values of the matches' presentation. In fact, ROH events often take place in small, poorly lit venues such as hotel ballrooms, armories, and community centers rather than the large arenas (and occasional stadiums) that house WWE events. ROH simply cannot compete with the WWE's production values and presentation style, so the company and its fans focus on what it does differently from WWE, which is the actual wrestling matches. And the minimalist setting and production values only adds to the bourgeois aesthetic where less is more.

However, this distinct focus still results in members of the IWC quantifying wrestling content when determining the specific aesthetic paradigm that will be used by fans. Instead of focusing on revenue, which is easily quantifiable, ROH fans focus on how to quantify the matches themselves. These fans in the IWC will examine a match in great detail and intricacy in order to present their own "star rating" for the match, often providing an explicit rationale for why a particular match deserves to have a "quarter-star" deducted or added to the final rating. This star rating system was popularized by Dave Meltzer in the 1980s with his *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, as Meltzer would provide a star rating for every match he encountered. He would withhold the prestigious "five-star" rating for very few matches, and even today many internet threads pop up dedicated to the few matches in history that Meltzer has given five stars to.⁹⁵ This attempt to attach a star rating to every match by ROH fans in the IWC serves as an

⁹⁵ For example, these internet threads are devoted to Meltzer's ratings: <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi?action=display&board=WWE&thread=375660&page=1>; <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=128865&hilit=dave>

attempt to quantify wrestling matches and compare them to matches from other wrestling companies. ROH fans may not be able to point to pay-per-view buyrates or Nielsen ratings as markers of success like WWE fans can, but they can argue that the matches in ROH “rate” higher than matches that are featured in WWE. The ROH aesthetic privileged by ROH fans in the IWC focuses on the aesthetic principles that privilege the matches and their perceived quality.

On the June 23, 2010 edition of the wrestling podcast entitled the *Bryan and Vinny Show*, co-host Vinny Verhei demands to his listeners that, “Everyone watch Ring of Honor... WWE sucks.”⁹⁶ This edict from a popular personality within the Internet Wrestling Community like Vince Verhei reflects the tension between these two wrestling promotions and their fans in the IWC, as Verhei makes an aesthetic critique of WWE programming in favor of the content in ROH. Verhei does not argue that listeners abandon ROH because of its limited fanbase and recognition. Instead, his rationale is that WWE programming is inferior to what is found in ROH and he demands that listeners support the superior product. This focus on aesthetic superiority is echoed by many in the IWC, even though the *Bryan and Vinny Show* provides Verhei the ability to reach a much larger audience. For example, one commenter on 411mania.com responds to a claim that the website has a bias towards ROH (I would argue the opposite in my evaluation of the website) by stating that, “If 411 have (sic) an inherant (sic) bias towards ROH, it can only be because they appreciate good wrestling and are sick of the shit paraded as wrestling on *Raw*.”⁹⁷ On the ROH forum, fans are equally critical of the WWE product in relation to the matches in ROH. For example, one fan states that, “The workrate of even an average ROH match has

⁹⁶ The *Bryan and Vinny Show* features friends Bryan Alvarez and Vince Verhei review weekly wrestling programming and is found on the f4wonline.com website.

⁹⁷ MattClassic. (2009, July 8). 411 Interview_ROH President Cary Silkin. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/109532>

spoiled me. I end up yelling at the TV, especially if I'm looking at one of the shows from that big promotion in Stamford:⁹⁸ 'Come on and do something. Don't just wander around looking lost! Oh, another clubbing forearm; brilliant. The match is over!? It's only been 4 minutes!'"⁹⁹

The term "workrate" is often used by members of the IWC to denote the ability of a wrestler to work a believable match. Wrestlers with a good workrate are praised by these members of the IWC as they are able to facilitate the suspension of disbelief necessary to mark out and become a wrestling smark during a match.

The ROH aesthetic privileges this workrate of the wrestling performers due to its celebration of technique or style. In the popular aesthetic paradigm, style was subordinate to function. But within the ROH aesthetic, the aesthetic qualities of the performance are privileged. In addition, there is a connection to labor and work ethic implicit in this valorization of workrate, as the performers who work the hardest to facilitate the audience's willful suspension of disbelief are rewarded with the most veneration from these members of the IWC. Whereas wrestlers like Cena are rewarded in the WWE aesthetic due to their marketability, the wrestlers who are the most technically proficient in the ring in making the match seem authentic are privileged within this aesthetic paradigm. That this work ethic is rewarded in a populist genre like professional wrestling is not coincidental, as at the heart of this ROH aesthetic are blue-collar values, which glorify labor and hard work even without economic compensation.

The ability to mark out during a wrestling match that is performed well is the hallmark of the wrestling smark. As explained previously, a smark is a smart fan who knows that wrestling is scripted but is able to forget about wrestling's "scriptedness" during a match and behave like a

⁹⁸ Stamford, Connecticut is the location of WWE's corporate headquarters.

⁹⁹ Bobeperu. (2010, May 14). Signs you're an ROH fan. Message posted to <http://rohwrestling.com/forum/index.php?topic=525.105>

mark, or someone who believes that what they are seeing is real. Members of the IWC who champion ROH over WWE and focus on the aesthetic quality of wrestling matches focus on a wrestler's workrate, or how they are able to make these fans mark out during a match. These fans argue that the wrestlers in ROH are more capable of performing this type of match both because of their wrestling ability and because the promotion allows them to go out and have this type of match (in terms of time allotment for the match, the types of wrestling maneuvers performed in the match, and lack of narrative interference, which refers to the addition of narratives that may detract from the action in the ring). Looking at the responses from the IWC following an internet pay-per-view match in ROH between Davey Richards and Tyler Black in 2010, many members of the IWC were marking out on their computers following the match. For example, on 411mania.com one fan stated that, "Tyler Black vs. Davey Richards imo is the MOTY (Match of the Year) as of right now...WOW! Just holy shit!"¹⁰⁰ Another commenter on the site praised the entire event, stating that, "I've been going to wrestling shows for 30 years, for all kinds of promotions, and I can honestly say this was the best card I've ever seen live. Thank you, ROH."¹⁰¹ The fans at Meltzer and Alvarez's website, who are notoriously more jaded and in-character with their posts than other fans in the IWC, were also marking out and breaking character after the event. Rather than projecting a detached distance from the show and being sparse with their praise, The Board responded with posts like, "That whole fucking PPV. Jesus Christ."¹⁰²; "That was great that show was great and dear god I want to watch it again RIGHT

¹⁰⁰ enlightenedone9. (2010, June 20). 411's Instant Access 06.20.10_ROH Death Before Dishonor VIII. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/142872>

¹⁰¹ Canucklehead. (2010, June 20). 411's Instant Access 06.20.10_ROH Death Before Dishonor VIII. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/142872>

¹⁰² grody. (2010, June 20). Ring of Honor – Death Before Dishonor VIII Thread. Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=102496>

NOW!!!!”¹⁰³; and “the match had me marking out like a ten-year-old at points.”¹⁰⁴ These fans across the IWC are exhibiting the characteristics of the wrestling smark, as their presence on internet message boards dedicated to covering the backstage maneuverings of professional wrestling reveal that they are aware of the genre’s scripted nature, and yet there is ample evidence of them behaving like marks for this ROH event/match.

While many fans of ROH in the IWC were marking out over the quality of this match, even more of these fans were at work quantifying the match to make their argument for its superiority to matches from other wrestling organizations. They were specifically using star ratings to make the case for the match’s value. A columnist at 411mania.com, referring to the aforementioned match between Davey Richards and Tyler Black in ROH, stated that,

“This is why we love professional wrestling, period, end of story. Technical brilliance, insane high spots, startling brutality, and two men literally giving everything they have to entertain the fans. This wasn’t just about the ROH Championship. This was about Tyler Black and Davey Richards making their case for being the best in the world. And that might be exactly what they just did. Match Rating: *****.”¹⁰⁵

This analysis clearly focuses on the bourgeois aesthetics of the match before the columnist makes the comparison between this match and wrestling throughout the world, including the larger WWE promotion. Here is where a company like ROH can compete with WWE in terms of match quality. The analysis concludes with the columnist’s star rating, as he gives the match a full five-star rating, denoted by the asterisk, which resembles a star in its appearance. This

¹⁰³ truthslayer. (2010, June 20). Ring of Honor – Death Before Dishonor VIII Thread. Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=102496>

¹⁰⁴ pinktrees. (2010, June 20). Ring of Honor – Death Before Dishonor VIII Thread. Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=102496>

¹⁰⁵ Slimmer. (2010, June 20). 411’s Instant Access 06.20.10_ROH Death Before Dishonor VIII. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/142872>

appearance of the asterisk is also often related to a snowflake, which many fans in the IWC will say when referring to a match, asking how many snowflakes it received.

The 411 columnist's analysis of the match between Richards and Black was mirrored throughout the IWC, as fans who wrote on message boards also offered their analysis and star rating. One fan submitted his response to Meltzer personally, who published it on the front page of the f4wonline.com website. This fan, referring to the match between Richards and Black, stated that, "Words cannot properly describe the greatness of this match. This is the best professional wrestling match I have seen all year and in years. This could be my new favorite ROH match of all time (that says A LOT). It was just amazing, 30+ minutes of balls to the wall action...*****"¹⁰⁶ A fan at wrestlecrap.com's forum echoed this infatuation with the match's aesthetic quality, and just like the fan at f4wonline.com he offered his own star rating amidst his marking out, stating that, "Davey Richards vs. Tyler Black: ***** (Five stars people! I'd give it ten stars if I could. Best. Match. Ever!)."¹⁰⁷ These responses echo Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of the Imaginary, focusing on how the performers in the match were able to make the match feel deep for those who witnessed it. That this fan expresses how rigid the star rating system is in his response, wishing he could give the match even more stars to quantify its value, demonstrates how ingrained the star rating system is within this subculture.

The most common critique of ROH from WWE fans is that the company is insignificant. Many members of the IWC point to the economic revenue generated by WWE, as well as the millions of people who watch it each week on television, and compare that level of visibility and

¹⁰⁶ Ricky C. (2010, June 20). More reaction to ROH Death Before Dishonor and Ultimate Fight Night. Message posted to <http://www.f4wonline.com/content/view/13800/>

¹⁰⁷ Mr. Socko's Brother. (2010, November 3). Your ROH Experience. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=wrestling&action=display&thread=327710>

economic success to ROH's modest existence as an internet company with limited financial stability. On The Board at f4wonline.com, a poster asked the forum if ROH was a major wrestling company in the United States. The first response was simply, "LOL."¹⁰⁸ Several other posters in the thread simply quoted the "LOL" as their contribution to the conversation, while yet another equated it to "the lemonade stand up the block."¹⁰⁹ Another way to criticize ROH as being insignificant is when members of the IWC refer to nobody caring about ROH aside from some very small number. For example, when then-ROH champion Tyler Black signed with WWE one fan stated, "Well, that should piss off the 46 ROH fans out there huh???"¹¹⁰ The same joke was repeated months later when ROH lost its deal with HDNet, as one fan responded, "what will the 28 ROH fans do now!???"¹¹¹ These fans are reacting to the perceived insignificance of ROH in the wrestling industry with sarcasm and comedy, but as we shall see there is much more vitriol directed to this promotion than snide remarks from the IWC.

Tyler Black's signing with WWE and ROH losing its television deal with HDNet serve as excellent examples of snide remarks and outright hostility directed to fans of ROH within the IWC. The attacks become somewhat personal from these members of the IWC, much more so than what was evident in the criticisms of WWE (although no less passionate). For example, when Black signed with WWE one fan stated, "Bahahahahaha. This backyard fed will be dead

¹⁰⁸ Deca-Durabolin. (2009, July 24). So is ROH considered a major US American company now? Message posted to <http://forum.f4wonline.com/bb/viewtopic.php?t=80177>

¹⁰⁹ cactuschuck. (2009, July 24). So is ROH considered a major US American company now? Message posted to <http://forum.f4wonline.com/bb/viewtopic.php?t=80177>

¹¹⁰ Guest#5801. (2010, August 8). WWE Signs Tyler Black. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/148469/>

¹¹¹ Guest#5922. (2011, January 12). Ring of Honor Splits with HDNET. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/169775/>

soon. The WWE will probably send him to FCW to wash the ROH stench off.”¹¹² The delight in seeing ROH potentially go out of business is a hallmark of this hostility from these members of the IWC, as there seems to be some threat of these fans and ROH that must be eliminated. The irony, of course, is that economically speaking ROH is not competitive with WWE. The notion that there is a stain of ROH on Tyler Black is echoed by these fans when ROH lost its limited television deal with HDNet, as these fans seem to delight in ROH’s struggles. They criticize the company and use its cancellation as evidence that it is an inferior product to WWE. For example, one fan states that, “Who gives a shit? Some shitty over-hyped no-name indy fed isn’t being shown on its crappy obscure network any more, big deal. Maybe now all the pompous ROH fanboys will finally accept that their high school gym fed sucks dick.”¹¹³ Another fan states, “Face it, ROH is just another shitty indy fed full of vanilla no-names that can’t draw, they didn’t belong on TV anyway.”¹¹⁴ These responses demonstrate how terms like “indy” are used to deride ROH and its fans, focusing on how the company cannot draw, as opposed to its aesthetic qualities. Once again, these are similar criticisms that are leveled at other media forms in different contexts, including independent film (Newman, 2011) and music (Thornton, 1996), although usually with less outright hostility than what is found within the IWC. These members of the IWC contend the company is insignificant and does not matter to mainstream wrestling fans, and their hostility manifests itself in their delight to see the company struggle.

¹¹² Greg. (2010, August 8). WWE Signs Tyler Black. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/148469/>

¹¹³ Guest#6988. (2011, January 12). Ring of Honor Splits with HDNET. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/169775/>

¹¹⁴ Guest#6340. (2011, January 12). Ring of Honor Splits with HDNET. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/169775/>

This notion of independence is embodied as an aesthetic quality in ROH that marks it as distinct from WWE's corporate monolith, and ROH's independence is often used by fans as a reason it deserves support. While many WWE fans argue that WWE is the best wrestling promotion due to the amount of revenue it generates, there is little mention of WWE deserving support because of the content of its product. Instead, these WWE fans seem to want recognition of WWE's status at the top of the wrestling hierarchy over support from people not enamored with WWE. ROH fans, on the other hand, continually petition members of the IWC for support of the company, knowing how precarious ROH's status has been throughout the company's existence.¹¹⁵ Fans of ROH espoused the quality of the product and the connection they had to the promotion as reasons other wrestling fans should support the company, especially when the DVD market collapsed with the emergence of torrent sites online. For example, one fan on the ROH forum recounted his first live experience at an ROH event when urging others to support the company, stating that, "But what really stood out on my very first ROH card were three things that would become hallmarks of the company over the course of the next several years: rising stars in the wrestling business, fantastic matches between those men, and compelling storylines and angles that caused me to not make an emotional investment in the wrestlers, but in the wrestling company itself."¹¹⁶ This relationship with the company is discussed at length within the IWC, as fans of ROH feel that this connection is reciprocated by ROH itself. For example, one fan states that, "This company cares about its fans more than any other wrestling

¹¹⁵ In 2004 the owner of the promotion, Rob Feinstein, was featured on a televised sting of suspected pedophiles on the program *Perverved Justice*. He sold the promotion to Cary Silkin soon after news broke of the story. From 2004 through 2011 Silkin owned the promotion that struggled to earn a profit, with rumors constantly circulating about the company's impending demise until it was sold to Sinclair Broadcasting Group in 2011.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Bobo. (2010, November 8). From The Cheap Seats (New Column). Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?PHPSESSID=49iq91ltqolhjcvpihgvl25387&topic=2763.0>

company in the world, imo. It deserves all of our support as long as everyone involved continues to strive to put on the best shows possible and entertain us all.”¹¹⁷ Even the wrestlers who perform in ROH discuss this relationship between fans and the company, as wrestling veteran Steve Corino wrote a column that appeared on the ROH website that read,

“For those of you that came to the ROH TV Tapings saw that I am working with a torn left tricep and fractured elbow. Every one asks me why I would do that. Easy. You...I want you to know that these guys go out and work hurt for you...If there was no YOU, there would be no us...You keep everyone on their A game. Now you stay on your A game. Get out there and enjoy this amazing product. Relish in the fact that pro-wrestling the way that you like it is alive and well in one company...ROH is PRO-WRESTLING. ROH is YOU.”¹¹⁸

While obviously an attempt by the company to urge its fans to show support by purchasing merchandise, this article is representative of the type of intimate relationship that the company attempts to foster with its fans. At live events it is exemplified by the (former) owner of the company, Cary Silkin, shaking fans’ hands as they exit the venue and asking if they enjoyed themselves. These actions facilitate the sense of deservedness that fans of ROH feel towards the promotion, repeatedly stating how much the company deserves fans’ support.

Ring of Honor’s desire to present an alternative product to what is seen in WWE is valorized by many in the IWC. Until its recent purchase by Sinclair Broadcast Group, ROH has not had significant economic support from a major investor or corporation, unlike Total Nonstop Action (TNA), which is owned by Panda Energy.¹¹⁹ And obviously it was not a publicly traded corporation, like WWE. Ring of Honor was an independent wrestling organization, and this

¹¹⁷ Yogurt Hat. (2009, December 7). Cornette’s Contract With Wrestling Fans. Message posted to <http://www.rohwrestling.com/MessageBoard/topic.asp?TOPIC>

¹¹⁸ Steve Corino. (2010, October 6). An Insider Looking Out: It’s All About YOU. Message posted to <http://www.rohwrestling.com/news/an-insider-looking-out-its-all-about-you>

¹¹⁹ This changed on May 21, 2011, when Ring of Honor was purchased by Sinclair Broadcast Group. The press release can be found at <http://www.rohwrestling.com/news/ring-of-honor-announces-sale-to-sinclair-broadcast-group/>.

notion of independence is valued by ROH fans. This independence from corporate control and limitations imposed by stockholders or major corporations became a hallmark of ROH. Here wrestlers were able to practice their “art” with “no limitations and no restrictions.”¹²⁰ This notion of freedom defines independence, as other media realms equally feature fans lamenting the loss of authenticity or artisanship when an artist has to compromise integrity for the sake of corporate profit (most notably in music perhaps).¹²¹ ROH fans celebrate the company’s independence as they point to the wrestlers’ freedom to have the type of competitive, athletic matches they want rather than adjust their style for television time restrictions or to not overshadow more limited performers that are more prominently featured on the card. For example, one fan on the ROH forum discussing how some ROH wrestlers have done in WWE once they received a WWE contract states that,

“Just look at Spanky, Paul London, James Gibson, and Bryan Danielson for example, everyone here on this forum knows how fantastic each of these incredible talents are. But look at what happened to them when they decided to go for the money. James Gibson became Jamie Noble and went from being a (sic) outstanding competitor to a nationally televised jobber...Bryan Danielson became the infamous Daniel Bryan, and went from being ‘the american dragon’ too (sic) ridiculed for spending years working in high school gyms and armorys (sic). Losing all of his matches on a reality tv show, against other guys who could hardly run the ropes, let alone compete in the same ring as him.”¹²²

For this fan, these wrestlers were allowed to be great in the ring while in ROH, but when they went to WWE they had to adjust their style and sacrifice their art. Dave Meltzer, while

¹²⁰ This is a quote from former ROH booker Gabe Sapolsky and was taken from Madigan, T.J. 2005, September 10. Ring of Honor like Broadway: Sapolsky. *Calgary Sun*. Retrieved from <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2005/09/10/1210891.html>

¹²¹ For a discussion of indie sensibility and the loss of authenticity when one signs with a record label see Oakes, Kaya. 2009. *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture*. Holt Paperbacks, NY.

¹²² Rorshach. (2010, July 24). Who has accomplished all they can?. Message posted to <http://rohrestling.com/forum/index.php?topic=1719.15>

pondering the future of ROH alums like Bryan Danielson and Nigel McGuinness when they signed WWE contracts,¹²³ stated in the September 14, 2009 *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* that,

“Both have had numerous excellent matches, and had good matches when healthy virtually every time out. But they also worked a very different style, as they worked as main eventers with no hold-ups, using a wide variety of moves to an audience that likes innovation. The style is virtually the opposite of WWE, which in appealing to a more casual audience, needs a simpler style based on familiar moves.”

The difference in style that Meltzer focuses on is equated with a “corporate” mentality of professional wrestling, one that is dumbed down and sold to the masses rather than being artistically authentic to the individual performers. Jim Cornette, on the December 9, 2009 edition of *Wrestling Observer Radio* with Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez, states that we have to “get out of the corporate wrestling mentality...If you don’t try to take over the world you have a better chance to be a success in your niche of a market...Wrestlers and fans are the ones getting shit on by these battles between multi-millionaires.” Cornette advocates a wrestling promotion that is aimed at a specific audience, an audience of wrestling smarks, who is not trying to reach the masses and sacrifice its artistic integrity. In this way, ROH remains fiercely independent, aimed at a disenfranchised base of fans who don’t want to share the wrestling genre with a mythical casual audience that WWE targets. By targeting wrestling fans, the label of independent becomes something to be proud of in this part of the IWC. As one fan on 411mania.com states, being an independent wrestling promotion “should be considered a badge of honor.”¹²⁴

¹²³ Nigel McGuinness never actually worked for WWE, as he instead went to TNA and became Desmond Wolfe.

¹²⁴ DocSarpolis. (2010, February 1). Davey Richards Comments On The DGUSA Story. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/128655/>

However, many who champion the WWE aesthetic argue that these independent wrestlers are incapable of making it on the WWE's stage. For fans of WWE, McMahon's company represents the major leagues of professional wrestling, and just because you were successful on the independent circuit it does not mean you will translate that success in WWE. This is a skepticism that is echoed by WWE itself, as many wrestling journalists talked of former ROH and independent star CM Punk having to overcome the stigma of having independent success for years after he arrived in WWE (Meltzer, 2009). The premise in WWE is that if it did not happen in their company, then it did not happen and therefore does not matter to their audience. Fans of WWE echo these sentiments by deriding wrestlers who are not in WWE as being indy guys who only know how to do lots of flips, referring to the propensity of wrestlers on the independent scene to be smaller in stature to WWE's land of giants and able to do lots of athletic maneuvers that require them to fly through the air. Or, these fans deride independent wrestlers as being bland "vanilla midgets," a term that was popularized in the nineties by Kevin Nash, who referred to smaller wrestlers like Chris Benoit as being unmarketable because of his small stature and focus on wrestling over his character (Randazzo, 2008). For example, one fan impersonated an independent wrestler named BxB Hulk on 411mania.com by posting "in character," stating "I flipped around in a meaningless indy jobber, spot monkey match."¹²⁵ Focusing specifically on ROH, one fan states that, "It's not possible for anybody in ROH to have a 'star making performance' because none of these bland vanilla midgets are capable of being stars."¹²⁶ Even when these ROH performers come to WWE, like Daniel Bryan did in 2010, these fans attack ROH, its fans, and its former wrestlers by stating things like, "Where are all the ROH

¹²⁵ BxB Hulk. (2010, May 10). 411's Wrestler of the Week 5.10.10. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/138592/>

¹²⁶ Guest#8458. (2010, May 1). 411's ROH on HDNet Report 4.30.10. Message posted to http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/tv_reports/137701/

marks who said Bryan is the greatest thing ever?? All I've seen is an awkward looking vanilla midget with no charisma or mic skills who botches every match.”¹²⁷

This criticism that is often leveled at members of the IWC who prefer ROH/independence over WWE refers back to a focus on revenue. Instead of looking at the revenue the company generates, however, this criticism focuses on the lack of money independent wrestlers earn for their work in the ring. As chronicled on the DVD from independent wrestlers Colt Cabana, Bryan Danielson, and Sal Rinauro entitled *The Wrestling Road Diaries* (2010), the life of an independent wrestler involves performing in front of small crowds around the country (or world if a wrestler is fortunate enough to get a tour with an international wrestling promotion) for little money. Wrestlers in ROH are not exclusive to that company, as they have to supplement their income by taking dates with other wrestling promotions on weekends that ROH is not holding events. And many wrestlers have to maintain jobs outside of their wrestling career to survive. These hardships were detailed in Darren Aronofsky's acclaimed film *The Wrestler* (2008) starring Mickey Rourke as an aging wrestler who attended small shows for little money near the end of his career. Rourke's "Randy 'The Ram' Robinson" character mutilates his body for small payoffs and works part-time at a deli to earn extra money. The film resonated with many in the wrestling industry, as many independent wrestlers noted how close the film was to the reality they experienced as independent wrestlers, although WWE insisted it was an accurate depiction of wrestling's "minor leagues" but not the life of a WWE star (Meltzer, 2009). This critique is emblematic of what many say about independent wrestling, that it is shameful that a wrestler has to abuse his or her body with little to no economic compensation for their sacrifice.

¹²⁷ Valkamor. (2010, May 10). 411's Wrestler of the Week 5.10.10. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/138592/>

Dave Meltzer stated on the May 13, 2010 edition of *Wrestling Observer Radio* that independent wrestlers “work so hard for very little return,” referring to their lack of compensation for what they endure in the ring. Jay Briscoe, a ROH and independent wrestling veteran, addressed this issue specifically on the April 1, 2010 edition of *Figure Four Daily* with Bryan Alvarez by responding to Alvarez’s question about going to WWE at some point by stating that he wants to “make it to the big time...in our careers it’s a business and money talks...whatever’s best for my family...whatever’s the best business move for the future.” Here is a celebrated independent wrestler and star in ROH stating clearly that it is about earning the most money in his career so that he does not end up living the life of “Randy ‘The Ram’ Robinson” from *The Wrestler*. Members of the IWC take these comments to heart and encourage independent wrestlers to get out of the independent wrestling scene and companies like ROH in favor of the economic security of WWE. One fan on the ROH forum, when discussing independent wrestler Colt Cabana’s recent tryout for WWE, states that, “I bet its (sic) good to make that WWE money and to not have to destroy your body.”¹²⁸ This comment refers to the easier style of WWE matches than what is found in ROH matches, which are usually more athletically taxing endeavors, but does not take into account that ROH wrestlers perform far less often than their counterparts in WWE. There is a sense of rooting for many independent wrestlers to make it to WWE because of the promise of financial reward for these performers who have sacrificed for years on the independent wrestling scene.

However, there is also a sense of pity for many independent wrestlers from these members of the IWC. Rather than celebrate their aesthetic accomplishments on the independent wrestling scene, many members of the IWC who feel that earning the most money possible is the

¹²⁸ cm puns aka black daddy clarence. (2011, August 3). Colt Cabana works dark match at Smackdown. Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?topic=4886.15>

best indicator of value look at these independent wrestlers as being pathetic for enduring the wrestling lifestyle with little reward. For example, one fan on The Board states that independent wrestlers are “destroying their bodies and (enduring) concussions the way wannabe rasslers are...I feel sorry for many of these workers...these guys don’t have those types of options nor the intelligence to make it in other fields.”¹²⁹ A conversation develops from here over whether or not these independent wrestlers should be respected for their sacrifice. For example, one poster states, “they put on a great show for very few people for very little money. I have real respect for any semi-pro athlete who gives it his all to entertain people.”¹³⁰ However, the evaluative criteria of earning money trumps this sacrifice, as the responses are summarized by this single post: “But why put your body on the line for so little money?”¹³¹

Another aspect of the ROH aesthetic in the IWC focuses on the target audience of the wrestling organization. WWE, as noted previously, aspires to reach a large, heterogeneous audience of casual wrestling fans with its product. ROH, on the other hand, is aimed directly towards the niche audience of ardent fans of professional wrestling. Throughout its existence the company has relied on the hardcore fan base of professional wrestling for its survival, selling DVDs of events that featured little recognizable talent to fans unfamiliar with wrestling outside of WWE’s televised product. In fact, ROH has insisted that the company be referred to as a professional wrestling organization, refusing the moniker of sports entertainment embraced by McMahon’s WWE. Legendary wrestling personality Jim Cornette, speaking for Ring of Honor and its fans, challenged the tenets of McMahon’s sports entertainment and positioned ROH as an

¹²⁹ Frau88. (2010, May 3). I hate indy wrestlers. Message posted to <http://forum.f4wonline.com/bb/viewtopic.php?t=98972>

¹³⁰ sittingduhk. (2010, May 3). I hate indy wrestlers. Message posted to <http://forum.f4wonline.com/bb/viewtopic.php?t=98972>

¹³¹ ADizzle. (2010, May 3). I hate indy wrestlers. Message posted to <http://forum.f4wonline.com/bb/viewtopic.php?t=98972>

alternative that harkened back to the way professional wrestling appeared before the advent of sports entertainment. In doing so, he celebrated the label of professional wrestling, proud to call ROH a professional wrestling company and targeting those fans who called themselves fans of professional wrestling. One eloquent fan on the ROH forum who championed this cause when ROH was sold to Sinclair Broadcasting Group stated that, “This is a chance for ROH to show that wrestling can be something that isn’t just *Monday Night Raw*’s format...stop taking commercials during WRESTLING matches on the WRESTLING show...stop telling wrestling fans to tune into our wrestling show so we can sell you on anything that isn’t wrestling...I want one wrestling company with corporate-level financing to let me watch a wrestling show where they don’t try to tell me I don’t want to watch a wrestling show.”¹³² This frustration is echoed by many fans of ROH and professional wrestling in the IWC. For example, one fan on the ROH forum stated that, “I gave up on the WWE years ago...it finally got to the point where I couldn’t take the assenine (sic) storylines any longer...I’d take even ROH’s worst match against any of the E’s ‘sports entertainment’ any day of the week.”¹³³ Another fan on the wrestlecrap.com message board hoped for a televised wrestling program from ROH, stating that, “I could watch wrestling again instead of the variety show on steroids that Vince McMahon calls ‘sports entertainment.’”¹³⁴ These fans clearly want an alternative to WWE’s sports entertainment, something catering to their own interests as wrestling fans. That ROH targets this disenfranchised niche audience fits into the ROH aesthetic employed by these fans to determine value. ROH becomes more valuable to these members of the IWC because it is aimed at an

¹³² TQType. (2011, May 31). Ring of Honor Announces Sale to Sinclair Broadcast Group. Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?topic=4409.315>

¹³³ Extreme Horseman. (2009, December 7). Cornette’s Contract With Wrestling Fans. Message posted to <http://rohwrestling.com/MessageBoard/topic.asp>

¹³⁴ Playboy Don Douglas. (2009, December 11). Jim Cornette apologizes to fans. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=wrestling>

underserved wrestling audience. Of course, many WWE fans and members of the IWC dispute this claim, stating things like, “All professional wrestling is sports entertainment,”¹³⁵ and “So, am I the only one that sees Cornette as a guy that just can’t reconcile the way the business IS with the way it WAS, and he just stubbornly refuses to move on?”¹³⁶ The IWC is imbued with these dichotomous tensions, and by employing different evaluative criteria these IWC members stake their claim to what constitutes value within this subcultural community.

The most pointed criticism made by some members of the IWC against ROH is the criticism directed at ROH fans themselves. Most often these WWE fans resort to calling fans of ROH virgins or outcasts who dwell in the basement of their parents’ home. This rhetorical tactic is an attempt to invalidate the arguments leveled against WWE, equating the criticisms made by ROH fans as the rantings of a social outcast. For example, one fan criticizes ROH wrestlers as being insignificant while simultaneously attacking fans of ROH by stating that, “You blind indy marks need to face reality – nobody cares about these bland, forgettable amateurs other than sad virgin losers like you who all sit on youtube all day and never go outside. None of these guys you love so much could draw flies to shit.”¹³⁷ Similarly, another fan echoes these sentiments by stating that, “nobody cares about ROH other than a few hundred sad IWC virgins, go back to high school gyms where you belong.”¹³⁸ These degradations of ROH fans mirrors Joli Jenson’s (1992) notion of the fan stereotypically being depicted as an obsessive loner, as these WWE fans legitimize their own fandom by mocking or othering these ROH fans. It is almost as if these

¹³⁵ Seagull. (2009, December 7). Cornette’s Contract With Wrestling Fans. Message posted to <http://www.rohwrestling.com/MessageBoard/topic.asp?TOPIC>

¹³⁶ Spankymac is ready to EVOLVE. (2009, December 10). Jim Cornette apologizes to fans. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=wrestling>

¹³⁷ Truth. (2010, May 10). 411’s Wrestler of the Week 5.10.10: Week 6. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/columns/138592/>

¹³⁸ Guest#9206. (2011, January 12). Ring of Honor Splits with HDNET. Message posted to <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/169775/>

members of the IWC are saying that they recognize they are behaving as fans, but at least they are not as bad as these deviants in the basement who don't know how to talk to people outside of their subcultural community.

The bourgeois aesthetic exhibited by ROH fans differs drastically from the popular aesthetic prominent amongst WWE fans, as we have seen. Each set of fans in the IWC then uses their specific aesthetic paradigm to denigrate the other wrestling promotion and its group of fans. What is left is seemingly another divide between wrestling and sports entertainment fans who are theoretically all part of the same subcultural community. It takes something monumental to remind these fans that there is a shared connection between them, despite their numerous differences in how they determine value for wrestling texts. In the final section of this chapter, we will examine a way to highlight the connectedness between members of the IWC. Despite the numerous differences that have been the focus of this chapter, there is something about the genre that brings these people together, and it can only be fully illuminated by using the concept of play.

Fantasy Booking and CM Punk

On the June 27, 2011 edition of WWE's *Monday Night Raw*, the IWC was energized by a performance from CM Punk. CM Punk, a former ROH wrestler who left the promotion in 2005 and joined WWE, delivered a promo on that evening that is described in the wrestling industry as a "worked-shoot." This phrase refers to the promo having roots outside of the diegetic universe of WWE programming, but delivered within the context of WWE's diegesis. In the promo, CM Punk talked about issues such as how he has been held back by WWE's creative team and how

Vince McMahon has sabotaged his own business by not listening to his most ardent fanbase – wrestling fans. Punk also acknowledged other wrestling companies and wrestlers not under WWE contract, specifically name-dropping Ring of Honor and his longtime friend Colt Cabana. The entire six-minute interview is transcribed in Appendix III at the end of this chapter. The contents of that interview ignited a firestorm within the IWC on that evening and in the days following the interview, as wrestling fans in the IWC began speculating about where this narrative would lead and whether or not it was “real.” As we shall see, this worked-shoot promo brought together seemingly disparate parts of the IWC and united these fans despite their adherence to distinct evaluative criteria. Just as what happens when a wrestling smart fan marks out and becomes a smark, this promo turned the entirety of the IWC into smarks as they played with the potential direction of the narrative. Their use of play is best described by “fantasy booking,” as this is what brought these fans together as they speculated about the direction of the narrative.

ROH fans have long admired CM Punk from his time on the independent scene. When he left ROH in 2005 there was considerable concern over whether he would succeed in WWE, as he did not have the bodybuilder physique WWE privileges. Over his time there, CM Punk overcame much internal criticism from WWE, as Meltzer reported that he was often criticized in creative meetings for the way he carried himself (his confidence rubbed many the wrong way) and in one famous instance the way he dressed (he was reprimanded for not “dressing like a star”)(Meltzer, 2011). However, despite these criticisms, CM Punk succeeded in WWE, taking his place as a top star in the company over the years. This success was a source of pride for many ROH fans, as it was seen as one of their own being accepted on the largest stage in professional wrestling. That he remained true to his independent wrestling persona positioned

him as an outsider to WWE's corporate machine, which made his worked-shoot promo all the more impactful to ROH fans. On the night of his promo, the ROH forum featured many fans marking out over whether the promo was real or not, as well as demonstrating their pride for CM Punk saying what they had wanted to say for years to WWE. For example, one fan stated, "Oh my god, that was the greatest thing I have ever seen. CM Punk just had a shout out to ROH on *Raw*, with probably the best promo I have seen all year."¹³⁹ Another fan responded moments later with, "The most amazing promo in WWE in years, possibly ever. The line between work and shoot...non-existent (sic)."¹⁴⁰ Yet another response on the ROH forum stated, "Ladies and Gentlemen, THIS is what wrestling is all about. Moments like that remind me why I watch."¹⁴¹ That these mark-out moments were coming from the ROH board indicates how this promo united members of the IWC, as rather than praising ROH, these fans were excited about WWE narratives that featured ROH alum CM Punk and mentions of their beloved promotion. For an instant the lines between reality and fiction, between shoot and work, were blurred for these excited fans. Another fan on the ROH forum sums it up by simply stating, "I have no clue whether it's a Shoot or a Work."¹⁴²

The response on The Board was equally enamored with Punk's performance and the blurring of the lines between work and shoot. The Board features a thread each Monday on that evening's edition of *Monday Night Raw* with responses from forum members, and on this evening you can pinpoint exactly when Punk's promo began to make fans mark out and embody

¹³⁹ elementary. (2011, June 27). ROH on RAW. Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?topic=4676.0>

¹⁴⁰ young knockout kid. (2011, June 27). ROH on RAW. Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?topic=4676.0>

¹⁴¹ TheBrianJ. (2011, June 27). ROH on RAW. Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?topic=4676.0>

¹⁴² The Generic Luchador. (2011, June 28). ROH on RAW. Message posted to <http://rohforum.com/forum/index.php?topic=4676.0>

wrestling smarks. One responder at the start of his promo simply states, “wonderful,”¹⁴³ while the very next post is, “WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?”¹⁴⁴ That is followed by a post reading, “He’s shooting. He’s shooting.”¹⁴⁵ In the pages of responses following this initial reaction, posters repeatedly state how much they “fucking love this man,”¹⁴⁶ and how “This is so great.”¹⁴⁷ CM Punk’s promo forced members of The Board, notorious for being jaded wrestling fans, to mark out over his performance.

On the wrestlecrap.com forum, fans were also marking out over CM Punk’s worked-shoot promo. One response simply read, “HOLY CHRIST,”¹⁴⁸ while the next stated, “that. was. amazing.”¹⁴⁹ At 411mania.com the line between work and shoot was blurred to such an extent that one fan thought that, “I think we might not see CM Punk anymore on WWE tv.”¹⁵⁰ Another fan simply took pleasure in the promo’s aesthetic value, stating, “Thank you CM Punk, for delivering the most memorable WWE promo in years.”¹⁵¹ All of these examples illustrate how excited the IWC was for this promo that blurred the line between fiction and reality. These internet destinations had been source of consternation within the IWC, as this chapter

¹⁴³ adamannapolis. (2011, June 27). THE OFFICIAL RAW ROULETTE THREAD! HBK! Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=127557>

¹⁴⁴ FranchiseNation. (2011, June 27). THE OFFICIAL RAW ROULETTE THREAD! HBK! Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=127557>

¹⁴⁵ ultrablue22. (2011, June 27). THE OFFICIAL RAW ROULETTE THREAD! HBK! Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=127557>

¹⁴⁶ regpeg. (2011, June 27). THE OFFICIAL RAW ROULETTE THREAD! HBK! Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=127557>

¹⁴⁷ Sinbad. (2011, June 27). THE OFFICIAL RAW ROULETTE THREAD! HBK! Message posted to <http://theboard.f4wonline.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=127557>

¹⁴⁸ HummerX. (2011, June 27). CM Punk’s Shoot Promo at the end of Raw. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi/board>

¹⁴⁹ therageofeeyore. (2011, June 27). CM Punk’s Shoot Promo at the end of Raw. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi/board>

¹⁵⁰ LostCyborg. (2011, June 27). 411’s Raw Report 6.27.11. Message posted to http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/tv_reports/191977/

¹⁵¹ Nick M. (2011, June 27). 411’s Raw Report 6.27.11. Message posted to http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/tv_reports/191977/

demonstrated. And in this moment the differences in how these fans determined value in these online forums were disintegrated. On the evening of June 27, 2011, these were all fans of professional wrestling instead of parts of distinct subcultures within wrestling fandom.

The question remains why these boundaries disintegrated on this one evening. What caused fans to come together despite having very different evaluative criteria for professional wrestling? The answer to this question is that these fans were enjoying the fact that they could not tell immediately what was reality and what was fiction. And this blurring resulted in them launching into their own “fantasy booking.” Almost immediately, fans began to speculate as to what would happen next with CM Punk, as the crux of his promo was that he was leaving WWE after his match with John Cena because of his disgust with the direction of the company. He also threatened to take the WWE title with him when he left, and fans began to speculate what the ramifications would be if this were to happen. ROH fans immediately began to predict his return to the company, as when he left in 2005 at an event entitled *Punk: The Final Chapter* he appeared before his hometown Chicago fans in tears as he said goodbye to his home promotion for the WWE stage. In the weeks leading up to his departure from ROH, he won the ROH title and threatened to take it with him to WWE, a narrative dubbed by ROH fans as “The Summer of Punk” in 2005. Here was an updated “Summer of Punk,” only inverted as he was threatening to leave WWE with the WWE title and perhaps take that title to ROH. The fantasy booking commenced and the IWC was tantalized about the variety of directions the narrative could go.

Bryan Alvarez conducted a call-in show in the days preceding the match between CM Punk and John Cena where fans could offer their own ideas as to what would happen at the pay-per-view. This fantasy booking by fans included options such as Cena winning cleanly, Punk actually taking the title from WWE and appearing on various independent wrestling shows, and

fans guessing that another wrestler in the company would emerge and defeat CM Punk for the title after Punk defeated Cena. In the July 19, 2011 edition of *Figure Four Weekly*, Alvarez states that,

“Fans were so into fantasy-booking this show, and the finish the WWE used allowed them to continue doing so. What will Punk do with the title... Will he show up in ROH... Will he lead a ROH invasion... There are so many options available, and that right there is what made *Money in the Bank* (the pay-per-view event) so special.”

One fan on the wrestlecrap.com forum responded immediately after Punk’s promo with what he would do at the pay-per-view, stating,

“This is how I see MitB going down... Punk wins the title. Grabs the belt, attempts to run out of the building. McMahon’s music hits, and a HUGE stream of wrestlers, from both brands, guard the exit... Out comes the Raw MitB winner, who Vince DEMANDS cashes in the contract; and wins it off him with the other wrestlers personally escorting him out of the building.”¹⁵²

Former wrestler Lance Storm even offered his own fantasy booking of the angle, spending nearly twenty minutes on the July 7, 2011 edition of *Figure Four Daily* giving detailed plans of how he would handle the next eight months of programming leading into next year’s *WrestleMania* event.

Fans of ROH fantasy booked the CM Punk character according to the ROH aesthetic, focusing on how he could come to ROH since he already made money in WWE and could now return to the company that he loves. They also began speculating on matches he could have with members of the ROH roster, focusing on match quality over how much revenue it would generate in ROH. WWE fans also fantasy booked the CM Punk character, but were consistent with the popular aesthetic that they used to assign value to WWE texts. These fans offered scenarios that would create intrigue in WWE programming and subsequently drive up ratings

¹⁵² iainplaysdrums. (2011, June 27). CM Punk’s Shoot Discussion Thread. Message posted to <http://realwrestlecrap.proboards.com/index.cgi?board>

and pay-per-view buyrates for WWE. The aesthetic paradigms remained distinct, but members of the IWC were united in their propensity to fantasy book. This process, more than the particular aesthetic paradigm, is what brings fans of a genre together. As we shall see in the following chapter, it is this fantasy booking that is the hallmark of wrestling and media fandom. CM Punk's character and worked-shoot promo facilitated this fantasy booking to become paramount in the IWC, and reveals how play is used to traverse the seemingly irreconcilable boundaries between diverse components of a fan community.

Chapter Three

The Wrestling Audience and Gaming: Playing *Champions of the Galaxy*

Introduction

The wrestling audience exhibits a variety of complex behaviors that defy the dichotomous categories offered by previous conceptions of media audiences. As we have seen, the wrestling audience is able to behave as smarks (an amalgamation of marks and smart fans) in both live contexts and in online forums as they fantasy book wrestling narratives according to their own tastes and preferences. In this chapter, the wrestling audience is examined in relation to gaming, exploring how these smarks are able to both follow the rules of the game in order to play it successfully while simultaneously modify the game according to their own subjective criteria. The card game known as *Champions of the Galaxy* (or *COTG*) allows for an examination of a wrestling audience that fantasy books the narratives they want to see using the raw materials provided by the game's creator, Tom Filsinger. Since the fans are the ones doing the fantasy booking through playing the game, the criteria for success are entirely up to the individual player. However, there are many in the community who insist upon specific criteria for acceptable play, limiting the openness of play by adhering to strict interpretations of the rules in order to play the game correctly. These rules are both generators of play and restrictions on play, as they allow for the game to exist while simultaneously restricting the possibilities of individual rules and modifications employed by many within the fan community of *COTG*.

This chapter is the result of an extensive participant observation performed over many years of the *COTG* fan community. The chapter begins with an autoethnography of how I came to be involved in the game's community, including my first exposure to the game as a kid many years

ago. This autoethnography also includes my two trips to the annual convention for fans of the game known as Galacticon, detailing my experiences as an outsider to many in this fan community. In fact, I was not accepted into this community until I began to play a role in the community myself, adopting the moniker/character of “Hegemony” and interacting with other members of the community as a heel character within the *COTG* universe. Once I gained some acceptance within this community I distributed a questionnaire consisting of twenty-five questions about the game and its community, which I mentally had separated into three categories. These categories were:

1. Personal Information and Rituals – Consisting of the interests of those who play the game, how they play the game, where they play the game, and how long they have played the game.
2. Game Modifications – How they modify the rules of the game, whether they follow the official narratives provided by the game’s creator, their use of unofficial or “Promoter-Made” characters, and if they would alter the statistics of any cards in the game.
3. Community Involvement – Consisting of their interactions with fellow fans of the game, whether they attend the annual convention, and whether they maintain an online presence in the game’s community.

These categories help explain the complexity of the *COTG* audience and reveal the necessity of the concept of play for understanding how these fans are able to both explore the openness of the game and be constrained by the game’s rules when simulating their subjective *COTG* experience. I supplemented the questionnaires with in-depth interviews with interested participants, allowing them the space to expand on the answers provided in the questionnaires. What follows is an exploration of this fascinating fan community, one that exhibits similar

processes noted in the previous chapters but within a context that is more self-aware of its playfulness. In the previous two chapters, play was less obvious, but within the fan community of *COTG* everyone is aware that they are players. This chapter focuses on play at its most playful, but even in this setting, play runs up against its limits. This is why I selected this case study, as it highlights play's openness and limitations, illuminating what play means for a small group who is extremely committed to a particular text. It allows us to witness small group dynamics more clearly since we have already looked at a macro-perspective of play within the larger genre of professional wrestling in the previous two chapters.

Autoethnography – Ready for a “Hot Summer” and Galacticon 2006

Thumbing through the pages of the wrestling magazine *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* as a kid in 1991 I came across an advertisement for a game called *Champions of the Galaxy*. I was an avid wrestling fan at the time, as well as a fan of comic books and superheroes. The first part of the advertisement to catch my eye was the drawing of a figure labeled as “Bishop Hell.” This character was adorned with a domed hood featuring an exaggerated skull, mirroring the shape of the hoods worn by the Ku Klux Klan, although shaded to provide some departure from the KKK organization and not completely obscuring the face of the character. I didn't realize at the time the racial politics in the image, but I did sense a taboo quality to the image. In his memoir, Tom Filsinger (2005) described the character of Bishop Hell as, “one of the most controversial characters I ever created with equally naughty art”(p. 192). In addition to the domed hood, the character also had an image of a cross drawn on its torso, as well as a dark cape that shrouded its heavily muscled body. Given the name “Bishop Hell,” I did sense that this character was

blasphemous in some way, reflecting my years of Catholic school upbringing and tedious relationship with religion at this stage of my young life. This iconography of religion, hatred, and strength certainly open the character up for intriguing interpretations, but for me this ornamentation accentuated the potential possibilities for the character. By recalling something so taboo as the KKK and bordering on the blasphemous, this character was imbued with all sorts of heelish possibilities, a wrestling villain that “real” wrestling could only dream of. It is important to note that the hood of Bishop Hell merely evokes the KKK, as the character is not written as a member of the organization. Although he is presented as a villain, his villainy has no direct referent to the hate crimes committed by the Ku Klux Klan.



Figure 3 – Bishop Hell from *COTG*

The most iconic feature of this character, exceeding even the controversial nature of its costume, was its hand. Posed in an ambiguous position of orgasmic pleasure or tempestuous rage, Bishop Hell was drawn with his arms curled upward, mouth open, and beginning at the wrist, his left hand was engulfed in flames. Next to the drawing of the Bishop Hell character was the phrase, “Are You Ready For A Hot Summer?” The text of the advertisement provides some detail on the character, declaring that this Bishop Hell character is a rulebreaker who uses an illegal maneuver dubbed “Hellfire” that features him blasting his heroic opponents with a

fireball while the referee is distracted in order to win his matches. For a young wrestling fan, this sounded like the coolest, most contemptible villain imaginable, and I was certainly intrigued to find out more about this game and its cast of characters. After all, Bishop Hell was just one of a presumably large cast of characters with infinite possibilities.

The potential of these characters is immediately espoused in the advertisement. The text of the ad begins by stating, “Wrestling of the future is just as wild and fun as wrestling today. Especially when you’re playing *Champions of the Galaxy*, the hottest action game around. It’s wrestling one hundred years in the future, with a whole federation of awesome stars at your fingertips.”¹⁵³ Here was a game that offered intriguing characters like Bishop Hell for me to organize and control. This game offered me a tremendous opportunity to *play* with these characters and their possibilities. At the time, the game offered five separate editions, each coming with a set of different characters. I begged my aunt to purchase all of them for me, and a few weeks later the world of *Champions of the Galaxy* was mine to lose myself in as I constructed wrestling narratives and simulated wrestling matches in the privacy of my bedroom. Little did I know at the time that this game and its fan community would become such an integral part of my scholarly work and understanding of media audiences many years later.

Champions of the Galaxy was a part of my youth, although my teenage years beckoned and with them many changes in my hobbies and infatuations. Soon I spent more of my time trying to impress the opposite sex, and accoutrements such as wrestling and comics, to say nothing for a card-and-dice game about wrestling characters in the future that had special powers or abilities, were sacrificed to maximize my cultural capital within the dating world. I packed *COTG* into a box and placed it in my closet, a memory of younger more carefree days but with

¹⁵³ Ashby, Mark. (2002). *The GWF Files (Second Edition)*. Filsinger Games, NY.

little applicability to my teenage life. In fact, *COTG* remained a fondly remembered part of my youth until internet-fueled nostalgia allowed me to visit the game's website in 1998. This took place during wrestling's resurgence in popularity in the late nineties, and I was impressed to see that *COTG* had indeed carried on without me. I perused the game's website and guestbook, as well as fan-made websites devoted to the game and its characters. In time, I purchased the editions I had missed during my years away from the game, although I found little time to actually play the game myself. Every now and then I would manage to spend a night simulating matches, but overall my *COTG* experience was peripheral and vicarious, as I would instead read about how other players used the game and its characters. The more time I spent reading about the game, however, the more intrigued I became to start my own federation once again and craft my own futuristic wrestling narratives, especially as my own dissatisfaction with various professional wrestling companies grew over time. I actually began playing the game again in my limited amounts of spare time once I began graduate school in 2005, although my experiences with the game and its fan community certainly impacted my fandom as the years have progressed.

The game and its fan community interested me tremendously in my early years in graduate school, and in the summer of 2006 I decided to begin an ethnographic study of these fans and *COTG* by attending an annual convention in Jamestown, New York called Galacticon. Galacticon began in 1990 as an event where many of the game's most ardent fans would congregate and share their experiences, given that for many of these fans their experience of the game was solitary. In addition, for many of the game's fans it was an opportunity to meet the game's creator, Tom Filsinger. For many *COTG* fans, the game occupies an important position in their lives. Meeting Filsinger borders on idol-worship, and Filsinger himself seems to

encourage this behavior in many ways. For example, in *The Dark Menace of the Universe*, Filsinger (2005) begins the book with an introduction from John Ettorre that glowingly states Filsinger's "neon presence lit up everything and everyone for miles. To say that Tom had charisma even as a kid doesn't begin to explain it." (p. i). However, this idolatry is countered by the level of narrative fidelity many hold Filsinger to with the game, as fans often challenge him if/when his narratives do not remain consistent with the *COTG* mythology. For example, many in the community were resistant to the possibility of two characters (Star Warrior and Bloodline) being brothers since they were introduced so far apart in the game's chronology (2086 and 2109 respectively). Eventually, Filsinger relented and announced that Bloodline was Star Warrior's son, an acknowledgement that the fans were correct in this instance and that they possibly knew the mythos of the game better than its creator. In many ways, Galacticon serves as both an opportunity for a small group of game fans to congregate around a subject they adore as well as an opportunity for their self-described "leader in this madness"¹⁵⁴ to bask in his accomplishments.

In 2006 I had my first Galacticon experience. I did not know any of the attendees nor did I know how many people would be at the convention. It is fascinating that I seemed to revert back to my shy, awkward youth in the presence of other *COTG* players. My intent was to boldly introduce myself to fellow attendees and attempt to garner interest from these attendees in taking part in a future study of *COTG* and its fan community. I figured that these fans would be thrilled to take part in this project, especially given that Tom Filsinger himself was an Associate Professor at Jamestown Community College (Filsinger, 2005). I arrived in Jamestown around 4 a.m. on Saturday, and immediately felt isolated as many of the conventioners had met Friday

¹⁵⁴ Many of the editions of Filsinger's *Champions of the Galaxy* credit Tom Filsinger as "the leader in this madness."

evening to play the game and receive the newest edition that was scheduled to be released at the convention. This feeling of isolation persisted as I made my way to Galacticon later that morning, as the convention officially kicked off at noon at Jamestown Community College.

There was a line of conventioners when I arrived, although there were probably only thirty-five people there at the start. I awkwardly clutched my notebook, an inexperienced ethnographer entering the field for the first time, as I awaited my turn to pay my convention fee and start interacting with members of this fan community. For some reason I declined to talk to anyone while waiting in line, as it seemed as if everyone already knew each other and had little interest in meeting someone new and adding him to their clique. I also realized, too late, that I was not playing the Galacticon game correctly. Once you paid your fee you received a nametag identifying yourself. The person in front of me, when asked what their name was, responded by identifying himself as “Mr. X,” a mysterious figure indeed. Displaying little acumen, when queried for my own name I simply and sheepishly responded “Shane.” Clearly my moniker was unfit for this new, fantastic environment.

What followed was nine hours of tedium and isolation. I bravely approached several people and introduced myself, and while no one was outright rude there seemed to be little interest in welcoming a new person fully into this community. Most of the attendees knew each other, and Galacticon served as a chance to catch up rather than to waste precious time with someone new. Further, the few people who did engage me in a conversation were quickly informed that I was a graduate student and was interested in doing a project on their beloved game and its fan community. There was little else I could do that shut down conversations faster than reveal my intent to study this insular community, especially as an outsider. I recalled Clifford Geertz (1973) and his ostracization from the Balinese until he ran from the police like

the rest of those attending the cockfight in his famous essay. And I certainly had the time to recall this influential piece, as I spent much of the day sitting alone in the middle of the room while various groups formed around me, like orbiting conclaves, and shared their *COTG* experiences. I did make note during this time of the general age, race, and gender of the attendees at Galacticon in order to get a basic demographic idea of who these players were. Almost all were male, which I expected, and most were in their thirties or forties, at least as far as I could estimate from my interactions with them. Almost all of the attendees were white, and in total there were approximately forty or forty-five fans at Galacticon that year. In addition, many brought with them large binders filled with cards from the various editions of the game, as well as small cases that housed their dice. These subtle exhibitions of wealth, although not ostentatious, reflect the investment many of these players have made to the game over their years of fandom.

Galacticon 2006 was not a complete waste, however, as I met another first-time attendee and we had several enjoyable conversations about *COTG*, as well as subjects outside of the game. In addition, everyone who attended the convention that year was placed in a lottery where the winners would be able to create their own character for inclusion into the official game. Many attendees were tremendously excited about this prospect, and for fun I put my name in the ring as well. Very few times in my life have I been less excited to hear that I won something, but the first number called out happened to be my own. When I raised my hand to claim my prize, one of only twenty winners of this opportunity, the weight of the eyes of all of my fellow attendees was only outweighed by the deafening silence in the room. Their stares seemed to scream, “Who is that guy?” or worse, that the guy who won this slot is an outsider who is trying to exploit our community. Nonetheless, I won a slot in what was advertised as “Promoter

Madness.” Before leaving the convention that evening I had to offer the name of my character, and as a graduate student in cultural studies I went with the name “Hegemony.” This Hegemony character would, over the next several years, allow me to enter this fan community and participate in all of its intricacies. As we shall see, the Hegemony character would allow me to perform a more focused ethnography at Galacticon in 2009 and throughout 2010, as via the Hegemony character I became known as a member, for better or worse, of the fan community of *COTG*. I didn’t realize this at the time, however, and I left Galacticon 2006 early Sunday morning, despite the convention not officially ending until Sunday afternoon. I had traveled all the way to Jamestown, New York and left early because of how awkward my experience was that Saturday in July of 2006. But the seeds were planted to fully explore the *COTG* phenomenon, and the Hegemony character would serve as my vehicle in this exploratory project.

Champions of the Galaxy and the Imaginary Spaces of Professional Wrestling

Tom Filsinger began producing *Champions of the Galaxy* in 1986, although the game’s roots can be traced back to Filsinger experimenting with various game mechanics during his high school years (Filsinger, 2005). The one he finally settled on borrows greatly from the mechanic of *Strat-O-Matic Baseball*, which features individual playing cards for baseball players with statistics on the card that provide instructions corresponding to specific dice rolls. Filsinger adopted this mechanic for the genre of wrestling, crafting individual wrestling cards with an avatar of the character on the front of the card and wrestling maneuvers that correspond to particular dice rolls on the back of the card. Filsinger expressed that he originally attempted to market the game to Vince McMahon’s WWF in the eighties, although McMahon instead decided

to produce a VHS-based board game in an attempt to capitalize on an eighties trend of games that included a VCR component.¹⁵⁵ This rejection led to Filsinger merging his wrestling game with another of his pastimes – comic books. Rather than produce a game that featured contemporary wrestling personalities, Filsinger began working on a fantasy-based wrestling federation set over one hundred years in the future. The GWF (Galactic Wrestling Federation) would feature characters from around the galaxy competing in a wrestling ring, alleviating the dilemma of getting permission to use the likeness of copyrighted wrestling personalities. And by setting his game in the intergalactic future, Filsinger was able to adorn his game with an assortment of super-human characters with an array of different capabilities/possibilities, something fans of *Champions of the Galaxy* would take advantage of when they played (with) the game.

Filsinger's decision to market his game mechanic under the guise of fictional wrestling characters set in the future simultaneously freed Filsinger from having to work under WWE (at the time still known as the WWF) and positioned his game on the periphery of the wrestling genre.¹⁵⁶ Without the marketable stars of national wrestling promotions like WWE, Filsinger had to market his game to a subset of wrestling fans who were also into gaming and comic books in the eighties. Taking out advertisements in wrestling magazines such as *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, Filsinger aimed his new game to wrestling fans by suggesting that they could control

¹⁵⁵ For example, I remember playing a VCR version of *Clue* around this time, as well as owning the WWF-produced *WrestleMania VCR Game*.

¹⁵⁶ Filsinger would launch a version of his original idea in 2003 when he released *Legends of Wrestling*, a card game that uses the same mechanic as *Champions of the Galaxy* and features the likenesses of actual wrestlers throughout history. Filsinger chronicles this history on the game's website at <http://www.cotgonline.com/fg/low/thelegendsstory.php>.

an array of wrestling characters and run their federation according to their own tastes.¹⁵⁷ These ads featured phrases that focused on the level of control each “promoter”¹⁵⁸ would have over the characters in the game, including lines such as, “You are the head promoter! You sign the matches, set up super-cards, and have tournaments for the belts,” and

“Who will win this classic GWF feud pitting two superstars against each other? As a GWF promoter, you’ll find out! You decide whether it will be a regular match or a special match like a cage match! You decide whether Bishop Hell’s manager will be allowed at ringside. As a GWF promoter, it’s up to you.”¹⁵⁹

This final phrase of “As a GWF promoter, it’s up to you,” exemplifies the level of control players have over the game, which I inferred was what made the game so special to its devoted niche audience. I assumed that these fans would support *COTG* because it offered them a level of control over the wrestling genre that other mediated arenas of wrestling did not afford. What I discovered about this fan community was that there were certainly some who loved that the rules of the game were literally “up to you.” For others, however, there was an adherence to Filsinger’s personal rules and narratives that superseded any level of control or authority players/promoters wanted to exert over the game. Within the periphery of wrestling fandom, namely within the *Champions of the Galaxy* fan community, similar debates about evaluative criteria and the best way to experience the wrestling genre manifested. In fact, it was within this

¹⁵⁷ Nearly every member of the *COTG* fan community reiterated that they first encountered the game via advertisements in wrestling magazines like *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* in the eighties and early nineties.

¹⁵⁸ Within the fan community of *COTG* each person who plays the game is referred to as a promoter, recalling the territorial system of professional wrestling where local promoters would stage wrestling events in their part of the territory. One narrative of the *COTG* universe is that these characters are contracted to the mythical Galactic Wrestling Federation (GWF) and each player gets to promote events featuring these stars that are under contract. Of course, this all takes place in the player/promoter’s imagination.

¹⁵⁹ Ashby, Mark. (2002). *The GWF Files (Second Edition)*. Filsinger Games, NY.

subcultural entity that the concept of play itself was most important, as the entire notion of what constitutes acceptable playing was being debated.

This level of control that *Champions of the Galaxy* offers its fans is part of the game itself. In an effort to appear as “real” as possible, Filsinger wanted his game to evolve each year (Filsinger, 2005). Advertisements for the game focused on this feature with phrases such as, “The GWF is a realistic federation! Old wrestlers retire, new wrestlers enter, there are even managers. Just like a real-life wrestling federation, the GWF is always changing. New game editions come out regularly.”¹⁶⁰ These new game editions have an obvious economic significance, as players buy editions as they are released. Even more significant is how each chronological edition adds to the layer of realism that the game is offering. Each new edition is titled for a specific game year. For example, the first game edition diegetically takes place in the year 2087. The first expansion pack, released the following year (1988), was titled “Invasion 2088” and diegetically takes place during the year 2088. Each expansion set follows in this pattern, with the most recent edition released taking place in the year 2126 and titled “Council of War 2126.” In addition, some expansion sets have been released outside of this chronology and called “Classics” editions, spanning the years 2074-2086. As a result of this chronology, the *COTG* universe has amassed over fifty years of diegetic history. Further, this history takes its toll on characters in the game, mimicking the changes that wrestlers undergo in real life. As the advertisement stated, wrestlers in the game are often introduced as young rookies. They get an updated playing card when they enter their athletic primes, often featuring a stronger playing card to reflect their advanced skill. As wrestlers continue to age, they often receive a new playing card that reflects their declining skill levels. Wrestlers also receive new playing cards if

¹⁶⁰ Ashby, Mark. (2002). *The GWF Files (Second Edition)*. Filsinger Games, NY.

they alter their character in a significant way, as players want these changes reflected in the game cards.¹⁶¹ This sort of detail makes the game appear more narratively coherent to its fans, mirroring the conventions of the genre in real life while simultaneously offering many possibilities that are absent from actual wrestling (Fisher, 1987). In this way the game parallels the concept of “world building” in science fiction, where writers attempt to flesh out as many aspects of the diegetic universe of a group of characters as possible in order to provide the most immersive experience for the audience (Jenkins, 2006; Friedman, 2005).

Each edition of *Champions of the Galaxy* represents another chronological year in the diegetic universe of the game. These editions come with a set of game cards (between ten and twelve depending on the edition) and a game booklet. The booklet is written by Filsinger and introduces new characters in the game to fans, as well as catches fans up with developments in the *COTG*-verse. When a new character is introduced, the booklet contains background information on the character, as well as a description of his or her wrestling maneuvers. Many of the game booklets feature dialogue from these imaginary characters, as Filsinger assumes the identity of each of his creations and provides a snippet of an interview to familiarize the character with game fans. As we shall see, these characterizations are a site of great debate within this community, as many take Filsinger’s characterizations as gospel while others ignore these lines of dialogue and replace them with their own versions of these characters.

These expansion sets accompany the introductory edition of the game, as *COTG* has two jumping on points for fans. The first is the original edition released in 1986, and the second is set in the game year 2119 and is called “New Beginnings.” This edition was a sort of relaunch of

¹⁶¹ For example, when a character turns from a heel to a villain he or she will often receive a new playing card to reflect their changed persona. These changes are evident both by the drawing on the front of the card and the wrestling maneuvers on the back of the card.

the *COTG* universe and was designed to encourage new gamers who may be intimidated by so many expansion sets to play the game from a later edition and get caught up to newer editions as they are released. When getting these sets you also get a copy of the rules to play the game.

These rules have options for players who want the basic set of rules or the advanced set of rules for the game. You also get a copy of various charts that represent wrestling conventions such as brawling outside of the ring and throwing your opponent into the turnbuckles or ropes. These options are all represented on the cards of individual wrestling characters. Each wrestling character card has a drawing of the character in black-and-white on the front and the array of offensive and defensive maneuvers on the back of the card.¹⁶² These maneuvers correspond to dice rolls (1-6) and when playing a match one simply follows the instructions on the card to see who emerges victorious. However, there are numerous ways that fans can adapt these rules. As we shall see, some fans ignore certain instructions, such as all instructions concerning the choice charts, while others are adamant in following each rule in the game.

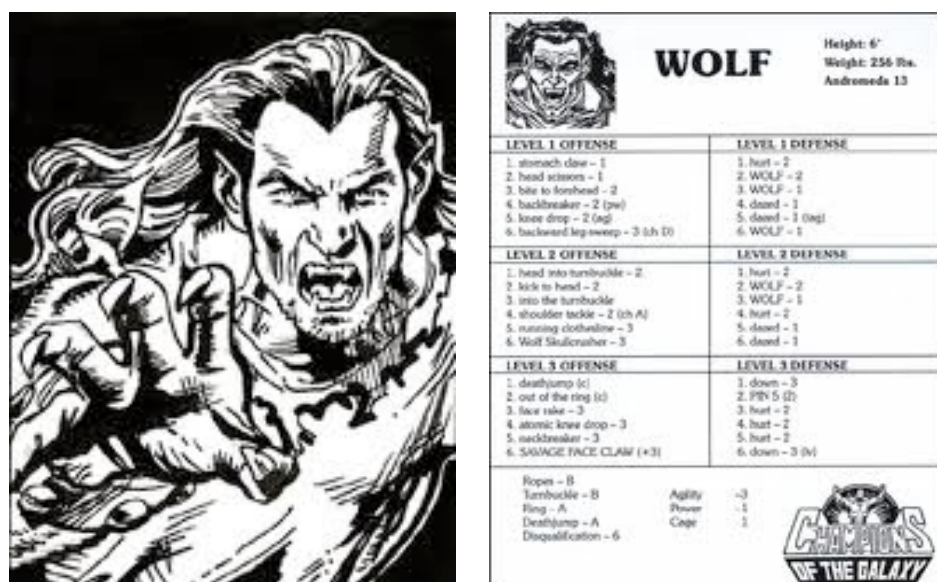


Figure 4

¹⁶² Starting with the 2125 edition of the game these drawings were done in color, to the consternation of some in the fan community. Most, however, praised the switch to color as it further solidified the avatars of many of these characters. What is lost in the colorization is some of the room left to individual promoters to imagine these characters in different ways.

The aforementioned cards, charts, and game booklets constitute the text of *Champions of the Galaxy*. There is no visual simulation of wrestling matches. Instead, the matches take place in the minds of the player as he or she rolls dice and follows the written instructions on each game card and choice chart. The static avatar that adorns the front of each game card is the only visual icon granted to these players, and since these icons are frozen poses of wrestling characters, the work falls squarely on the player to imagine each maneuver in the match. Further, many of these maneuvers are intentionally vague, as they either have no equivalent in the contemporary genre of wrestling or they are empty signifiers, phrases or words that offer no precise meaning for the player. For example, one character in the game is called “Mayhem” and his card features several vague maneuvers. Some of the maneuvers, such as the “Leap of Doom” and “Danger Zone” are described in the game booklet, so when a player rolls on that maneuver in the game he or she can visualize what the maneuver would look like if it was performed in an actual wrestling match. However, Mayhem also has a maneuver on his card entitled “Mayhem Manslaughter.” This move is not described in the game booklet and lacks any referent in the wrestling genre. Fans are free to imagine what they believe this maneuver is and then visualize it in a match when they are playing with the Mayhem character. The various message boards within this community often feature discussion threads about what they imagine these moves would be. Often these threads seem to strive for consensus on these maneuvers, but as several I spoke with indicated, they just continue imagining the maneuvers as they always have regardless of whether a community consensus ever arises.

In addition to imagining the actual wrestling matches in the game, players also imagine the interviews and promos that each character would provide if it was televised wrestling, mirroring the rhetoric of play as imaginary identified by Sutton-Smith in Chapter One. This

imagining of promos involves players assuming the role of the wrestler while making their proclamations and threats in the diegesis of the game. Many members of the community write long, detailed transcripts of their characters' interviews to share with the community, structuring their events like a wrestling event from WWE or ROH today. They will describe the matches and the interviews of each event they simulate with the characters from the game, morphing from delivering an in-character interview to an omniscient narrator who describes the wrestling matches, back to another character delivering a different diatribe, and so on until they have simulated a wrestling show that adheres to their preferred evaluative criteria for the wrestling genre. All of this takes place in the imagination of the player, as other than static cards with typed instructions for wrestling matches, there is no physical gamespace or media text for this practice. Players have to imagine these events, assuming the identity of various entities within the game's diegesis. In addition, these players must also keep track of their accumulated history, as the past of each character is prominent when they are simulating a new event. For example, in one interview a respondent told me that he likes to go back and read his game like a book before he simulates a new card, familiarizing himself with the narratives he was working on and simulating before his most recent break from the game. This way, he explained, he remembers that he was "building" towards a new feud involving two characters that had crossed paths three game years ago. He stated that this practice increases the "mythology of his fed," making it seem more real to him.

This focus on simulating matches and following the characters as they evolve reveals the most fascinating aspect of this game – that there is no way to "win" the game. Nearly every

person I spoke with and observed during this study claimed that they play the game alone.¹⁶³ Because it is a solitary game that simulates matches, most players assume the role of the booker or writer of the game rather than an individual character (unless they are getting in-character to deliver an imaginary interview to an imaginary audience). This is, after all, what the game advertised, as ads repeatedly stated that you could assume the role of the head booker of your own federation. The goal for these fans is simply to book or write the best wrestling federation they can imagine. The audience is entirely imagined, so if the player likes his or her iteration of the game then it could be said that he or she has won. In this way, players of the game only have to please themselves, making the game a distinct departure from the real professional wrestling that is aimed at larger audiences. Rather than a game, *Champions of the Galaxy* in many ways resembles a toy that gamers can play with as they see fit with no winners or losers. This heterotopian vision, however, is tempered by the rules of the game that many in the community insist must be followed in order to play the game correctly, a sort of intrusion of rules on the potential possibilities of play in the *COTG*-verse.

Many members of the fan community of *COTG* stridently follow the rules of the game in order to maximize their experience. However, many others revel in the room to experiment with the game. Diegetically, game fans can deviate from the narratives offered in the booklets, ignoring the descriptions and characterizations offered in the game booklets or deciding that certain characters should be allies or enemies based on their own ideas for the game. Fans also

¹⁶³ Two respondents were notable exceptions to this statement, as they play the game as a competition with each other. When a new edition comes out they draft the new characters to their team of wrestlers and then meet occasionally to simulate matches against each other. This way of playing the game stands out as unique as every other respondent claimed that they normally play the game alone, unless they are at a game convention with other fans of the game. In these communal instances, the game is played as a competitive tournament with players choosing a particular character and playing as that character throughout the tournament.

can institute their own upgrades or downgrades to certain characters, assuming that this character should not be declining so rapidly and altering the statistics on the card to suit their own notions of the character. Non-diegetically, fans also can play with the format of the game. Some fans color their game cards, instituting new costuming or conceptions of a character by offering their own take on a particular card. Others ignore certain charts or institute their own “house rules” for the game (such as a rule stating that a champion must be pinned twice in a match in order to lose his or her title). These spaces where fans play with the possibilities of the game are the focus of the rest of this chapter. Through participating at two Galacticon events and by being a character on the company’s message forum, I engaged fans of the game over several years and learned of the possibilities of this game, as well as the stakes for many who stray too far from the rules offered by the game’s creator. It seems that *COTG* is indeed a site that encourages the heterotopian possibilities of play while simultaneously displaying the tendency for players to be satisfied with following the rules as they are written.

Galacticon and Hegemony

In a previous section I discussed how during my first trip to Galacticon I was unsuccessful in recruiting members of the *COTG* community for my research on media audiences and subcultures. Rather than encountering an enthusiastic community that was excited about a project focusing on the game they all played, I met numerous individuals with little interest in letting an “outsider” enter into their corner of the universe. Most seemed very guarded regarding their beloved game, looking at me as someone with unclear or suspect motives who was pretending to be part of their community. Others were less suspicious, but still

seemed disinterested in taking part in the project since they had traveled to Jamestown, New York to visit with old friends and play *Champions of the Galaxy*, not be interviewed by a student from Georgia State University. My own insecurities amplified this situation, as my awkwardness around this insular group exacerbated my isolation from most in attendance. Recalling T.L. Taylor's (2006) ethnography of MMORPGs, if I had been in one of those games I would have been killed immediately by the players. Little did I realize that at this early stage the community was teaching me, demanding that I adapt and respect the rituals of the community.

This isolation and awkwardness reached its zenith with the "Promoter Madness" lottery, which was where convention attendees hoped to add a character they created to the official narrative of Filsinger's *Champions of the Galaxy* mythos. These characters would be included in a set in Filsinger's "Alternate Universe" line of products, which included game sets marketed by Filsinger Games that were not of his personal creation.¹⁶⁴ This set was to be called "Promoter Madness," which was an apt title since many in attendance were tremendously excited about the prospect of having a character of their creation included in the set. As I mentioned previously, the first name drawn in the Promoter Madness lottery was mine, and my victory was met with both silence and scorn from many of my fellow convention-goers. I had not prepared a character in advance since winning the lottery was not on my radar when journeying to Galacticon. After all, this was a business trip where I was set to accomplish some academic work and establish relationships that would prove beneficial in the years to come. My fellow convention-goers all seemed to have detailed ideas concerning their character, having obviously spent considerable time pondering the possibilities of their creation while I had fantasized about how eager

¹⁶⁴ The universe of *COTG* would expand greatly due to these expansions sets, as many fans of Filsinger's work would create game editions that focused on different wrestling promotions in Filsinger's diegetic universe, including editions from game fan Kris Osk (aCe) and Mark Ashby (CPC/POW).

everyone would be to participate in my research project. When it was time for me to provide the name of my character to a member of Filsinger Games, I did what any grad student in cultural studies would do – I thought of the best sounding cultural studies term I could think of and relayed the name “Hegemony.” This spur-of-the-moment decision would provide my access point to the fan community of *COTG*.

After Galacticon I had to flesh out this Hegemony character for the Promoter Madness set. Filsinger Games necessitated a brief biography, a description of the character’s appearance for an artist to work from, and statistics for the character’s playing card. I decided to make the character somewhat autobiographical, basing Hegemony on aspects of my own life. This inspiration was from my knowledge of the genre of wrestling, in which the most successful wrestling personalities are often based on their real life characteristics, only amplified.¹⁶⁵

Hegemony’s biography was also inspired by my own ethnographic failure at Galacticon, as I was unable to fully integrate myself into the *COTG* community. I felt as if my role as an academic was preventing me from being welcomed, considering so many of the fans I met seemed suspicious of my study. At this stage in my academic career, I was equally disheartened by the isolation of academia, sometimes feeling as though my seminar courses were firmly stationed in the proverbial ivory tower, far removed from the people and processes we were presumably studying. The result of this conflation of thoughts was Hegemony – a character who was studying professional wrestling as a graduate student in the future. This character became disillusioned with academia and the fact that the genre of professional wrestling was not taken seriously by mainstream culture, feeling as though when it was done correctly it was a powerful artistic expression. So this character left the ivory tower and began preparing to become a

¹⁶⁵ Wrestler Mick Foley (1999) discusses this in detail in his autobiography entitled *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*.

wrestler who would educate audiences and opponents to the genre's aesthetic potential. Like many academics, however, Hegemony had a difficult time relating to the people he hoped to educate without coming off as pretentious or arrogant. This arrogance was his heel persona, a misguided character that had noble intentions but lacked the patience to properly educate or engage those who disagreed with him. Hegemony was indeed a character based in my own life, but amplified to generate strong responses from those in the game community.



Figure 5 - Hegemony

Once the character's biography was created, I gave a brief description of his appearance (disheveled with uncombed hair and a beard who would be brandishing a microphone and talking down to the audience as seen in Figure 5) and his wrestling statistics (weak card as the character would have spent years in a library rather than in a gym). More importantly, I began to craft my entry into the online community of *COTG*, registering as Hegemony on the community's message forum and deciding to play the role of Hegemony while interacting with many on this online forum. In anticipation of the game being released I posted the following to the community, "You are all overlooking my arrival to the GWF. Such fools, you have no idea

that your feds and your lives are about to change for the better thanks to me – Hegemony.”¹⁶⁶

This post indicates that Hegemony was a heel character, talking down to others in the community. The post was also in-character, as I intimated that this character would improve the lives of those who interacted with him, as Hegemony’s intentions were noble (in his mind).

Over the next few years I would continue to interact with members of the *COTG* community playing the role of Hegemony, a person who was incapable of talking to others without talking down to them, which obfuscates the power of his message. In this way I was using the mythos of *COTG* to play with my own identity, mirroring the online forms of play that T.L. Taylor (2006) examines in *Play Between Worlds*, stating that “I was using the game as an opportunity to experiment, but my choices were always shaped by some reflection of what might be ‘more me’ or what might feel right.”(pp. 14-15). Hegemony was indeed an experiment, but one with a basis in my own life outside of the gamespace of *COTG*.

Over the next several years I continued to post messages as Hegemony on the message forums of *COTG*. There was always a line between Hegemony and myself, as I would remember to stay in-character while also espousing my own thoughts on aspects of professional wrestling and Filsinger Games. In order to accomplish this, I made sure not to ever post something I did not actually believe while simultaneously imagining my words as being those of a wrestling character who was frustrated that his words were not greeted with respect and awe, which was consistent with the biography of the Hegemony character. My posts were usually very long and wordy, as I conceptualized Hegemony as a character who would drone on and on about a topic to the (imaginary) audience oblivious to their contestations. Further, my posts were also derisive of this audience, as Hegemony would presumably look down on those who

¹⁶⁶ Hegemony. (November 21, 2006). Promoter Madness Sneak Preview. Message posted to <http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?action=display&board=GWF&thread=1304>.

disagreed with him or who failed to see the world as he did. The result was many members of the *COTG* fan community mocking Hegemony or greeting his (my) comments with apathy. One common example would be for a community member to ask for a brief translation of the long, rambling posts I made as the Hegemony character.¹⁶⁷ At first glance this approach would seemingly ostracize myself further from the *COTG* game community I hoped to understand, but after my experience at Galacticon and having observed the message forums of the community for some time, I reasoned that this approach would lead to a portion of the community welcoming me because I was now an active participant in their community who was playing a character in the mythos of the game.

This kind of intervention may seem inappropriate as an ethnographic methodology. After all, I was directly engaging members of the community I was studying and playing the character of a heel, which necessitated some confrontational moments on my part. But this behavior, residing within Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of Identity, reflects my attempts to blend into the community so that I had the necessary access to examine their relationship to *COTG*. Rather than simply a stunt, the Hegemony character was a necessary step to fit into the community I wanted access to. In addition, Hegemony was simultaneously a scholarly form of creative expression rather than simply a diversion. I often discussed important matters in my studies with these *COTG* community members as the online forum of the game became an extension of the classroom and my own relationship with the material. This may make Hegemony seem narcissistic, and in some ways it is (which is consistent with the Hegemony character), but it also further solidified my standing in the community since many see their online presence as a creative project. These fans post their cards online, transcripts of their imaginary interviews, and

¹⁶⁷ Majorbludd. (March 6, 2008). Joe Vs. Punk II. Message posted to <http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?action=display&board=roh&thread=18239>.

engage aspects of their Jungian shadow within the spaces of this game. By engaging in similar practices, I was able to be accepted as not only an ethnographer but as a fellow player.

This simultaneous inclusion and ostracization (as a heel character) by the *COTG* game community is exemplified by my participation in what they called a “Board Rumble.” In this Rumble, members of the *COTG* message forum were selected to enter an imaginary wrestling match that was similar to WWE’s “Royal Rumble” match, which features characters coming to the ring in timed intervals and battling to be the last man in the ring. You are eliminated by being thrown from the ring over the top rope to the floor below. In the Board Rumble, you were chosen at random to enter the ring by the community member running the match, and then members of the community would vote to keep you in the match or to throw you out of the ring. You started at five points and once you reached zero points (via having community members vote to eliminate you) you were metaphorically tossed from the ring/community. During the first of these Board Rumbles the Hegemony character was eliminated very quickly, as members of the community seemed to take great delight in throwing me/Hegemony out after enduring months of his long, rambling, arrogant posts. This game, however, seemed to be a turning point, as others in the community would often reflect with some nostalgia of the Board Rumble where Hegemony received his comeuppance from the *COTG* game community. My elimination became the community record for fastest elimination in a Board Rumble, and when subsequent Board Rumbles were held community members would recall that event when Hegemony was eliminated in short order.

I also used this Board Rumble experience to continue to integrate myself into the *COTG* community, although as a heel character. A second Board Rumble was about to be held in 2008 when I made a post that was designed as a promo from the Hegemony character, just as it would

appear if I was a wrestling character on television. One member of the community joked that he may beat my/Hegemony's record for fastest elimination in the match which prompted my response, which is transcribed below:

“After my treatment in the last board rumble (38 minutes real time, 1.9 seconds Rumble time), why would the glorious Hegemony return to this farce of a Rumble??? It is obvious this community doesn't recognize true genius, and my skills would surely be better appreciated in other ventures. Therefore, I, Hegemony will DECLINE this invitation to participate, even though I am sure that I will endure pleading and begging from many a soul craving my involvement. No, your pleas will not even be entertained, since I am sure there will be barbs and asides about my being “in a closet” or playing second fiddle to weak characters like a “wrestling ant.” Hegemony plays second fiddle to no ant, and surely will not be made the fool and locked in a metaphorical closet. Anyway, what sort of community encourages jokes and scenarios designed to belittle the sexual preferences of homosexuals? To say nothing of the bias against the mentally challenged, overweight, and untanned souls in the world. Why would Hegemony, who wants a better quality of life for all and is trying to educate the ill-informed, want to participate in such drek? On second thought, what better way to prove my superiority than to go from “worst-to-first” in this farce of a Rumble? Then, two records will be mine. Quickest elimination one year, and marathon man the next. Yes, I can see it now, my fans chanting my name as I overcome the odds and win this Rumble. Let the nonbelievers quake in their boots at the thought of the impending battle and victory by yours truly, as a new day is dawning. Let the galaxy, and particularly this community, rejoice in the news, HEGEMONY has entered this year's Board Rumble, and my victory will be sweet indeed.”¹⁶⁸

This post brought up many clashes and interactions with other members of the *COTG* community, including my defending wrestlers who did not have good tans or were overweight. As we shall see, my time as Hegemony ran afoul of several members of the game community who policed the message forums and often pressured fans into obeying certain rules or leaving the community, and these skirmishes were contextual factors to what happened in these online games like the Board Rumble. After posting the above message, the response to my involvement in the Rumble as the character Hegemony was pretty positive, with one post declaring that my

¹⁶⁸ Hegemony. (January 12, 2008). Board Member Rumble. Message posted to <http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?action=display&board=general&thread=15359>.

rant was “awesome!”¹⁶⁹ Of course, I was still a heel to most in the community and I was eliminated quickly yet again from the Board Rumble. But this character I was playing was allowing me access to the fan community of *COTG*, as I was an active participant in the community, even when I disagreed or had online skirmishes with some of the more prominent members of the community.

One example of these skirmishes was during the tragedy of WWE wrestler Chris Benoit murdering his wife and son before hanging himself in 2007. This event had an enormous impact on wrestling fans, many of whom idolized Benoit and had to come to grips with one of their favorite performers doing something so unfathomable. After the murders I created a thread, as Hegemony, on the message forum of the game community asking if it was possible to isolate Chris Benoit the performer from Chris Benoit the man who murdered his family. I titled the thread, “Benoit, Althusser, and Legacies,” as I made the connection to theorist Louis Althusser who had made considerable contributions to the field of cultural studies but who murdered his wife. The response from many in the community, particularly prominent members from Detroit who had a reputation for bullying members of the community, was very hostile. Many insisted that the thread should have never been made.¹⁷⁰ The thread ballooned to ten pages very quickly and devolved into many negative accusations. The moderator allowed it to continue in hopes of a discussion forming around Benoit’s legacy after the tragedy, but many in the community acted out in aggression and kept demanding the thread be locked so we “could move on,” even though

¹⁶⁹ Traviz. (January 12, 2008). Board Member Rumble. Message posted to <http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?action=display&board=general&thread=15359>.

¹⁷⁰ Gatekeeper. (June 29, 2007). Benoit, Althusser, and Legacies. Message posted to <http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=general&action=display&thread=15265>.

they kept refusing to do so and kept posting in the thread.¹⁷¹ These sort of arguments were commonplace in the fan community of *COTG* and often revolved around a familiar cast of characters who were longtime fans of the game and closely associated with the game's creator, Tom Filsinger. As noted below, these fans used play to also engage aspects of their personality that may normally remain hidden, but the consequence of this behavior was a fractured community of fans.

The skirmishes and in-character posts on the message forum of *COTG* allowed me to gain acceptance from many in this community. This acceptance paid off in 2009 when I returned to Galacticon to begin the main component of my study of how these fans play *Champions of the Galaxy*. Of course, I had learned my lessons from my previous experience at Galacticon, as my nametag proudly displayed the moniker "Hegemony" as I entered the convention in 2009. And I was greeted warmly by many at the convention, including some that I had butted heads with on the *COTG* message forum. As Hegemony I was a welcomed member of this community, even though my online role was one of a heel. After all, professional wrestling needs both heels and babyfaces, and the realm of *COTG* was no different. I was even afforded the opportunity at the convention to address all the convention goers at once and explain who I was and what the purpose of my study was. At this point I was able to hand out my questionnaire to all in attendance, although not every person agreed to take part in the study. By taking on the character of Hegemony that I created for the game, I was afforded more opportunities to address those at Galacticon, as in 2006 I was firmly positioned as an outsider. Those in attendance in 2009 talked with me as if I was an old friend, despite our never having met face-to-face in the past and despite our online play as heels and babyfaces. At the convention that year I took part

¹⁷¹ Swarm. (June 29, 2007). Benoit, Althusser, and Legacies. Message posted to <http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=general&action=display&thread=15265>.

in tournaments with other convention goers and was even invited to attend a UFC viewing party after the convention at a hotel in Jamestown, New York. These fans, for the most part, seemed to fully understand that I was playing a character online and was not, in fact, the arrogant character of Hegemony in my “real” life, at least not completely that character.

The questionnaire was crucial to my study, as over the years I developed twenty-five questions that addressed the community of *Champions of the Galaxy*, the game itself, how the game related to the genre of professional wrestling, and how individuals modified (or refused to modify) aspects of the game to suit their own tastes and interests. The questionnaire was organized into three basic categories, although these categories were not separated on the paper. The categories were conceptualized as: personal information and rituals, which included things like how long a player has used the game, where they play, any rituals or processes that are associated with playing the game, do they watch contemporary wrestling, and how much of the Filsinger Games catalogue of materials they collect; game modification, which includes their fidelity to the rules of play offered by Filsinger Games, whether they stray from the narratives provided by Filsinger, whether they use all the characters as they are written in the game in their own federations, and do they modify any of the cards when playing the game; and community involvement, which is focused on how they interact with others in the community, what their online presence is, do they go to the annual Galacticon convention, what their thoughts are of the fan community of the game. These categories address the more theoretical questions I had about play and the freedom of the player to modify rules based on their own subjective tastes and desires, as well as how *COTG* fits into larger aspects of their media and wrestling fandom. I distributed the questionnaire at the convention and following the convention also posted a request for participation online to reach those fans of the game who do not attend Galacticon.

Participation was completely voluntary, and game fans could drop out of the study at any time. Many chose not to participate, but I did receive more response than I had in 2006 and was able to get twenty-six questionnaires filled out by various members of the Filsinger Games fan community.

In addition to the questionnaire, I asked respondents to provide contact information so that I could conduct in-depth interviews with interested parties after completing the questionnaire. Most who filled out the questionnaire were happy to take part in the phone interviews as well, although several declined to participate in the follow-up phone interviews. The phone interviews were designed as an opportunity to elaborate on the responses provided in the questionnaire, as theoretically players could go into greater detail about their experiences of *COTG*, its fan community, and their experiences with the game. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the three sections of the questionnaire and in-depth phone interviews that I gathered as a result of my performance as Hegemony in the *COTG* fan community. This fan community uses the heterotopian possibilities play presents and the constraints placed on play by rules in order to generate meaningful experiences from *Champions of the Galaxy* and its fan community.

The Fan Community of *Champions of the Galaxy* – Personal Rituals and Information

Many of my questions were geared towards finding out about the audience of *Champions of the Galaxy* – who they are and what other interests they have. After all, *COTG* is based on modern-day professional wrestling, so I assumed many of these fans would also have feelings about the contemporary state of wrestling. In addition, since no media audience exists in a vacuum I was curious about what other media texts these fans enjoy when they are not playing

COTG. Most importantly, I wanted to examine how the audience of *COTG* plays the game, which is a question that often confused many who I interviewed. I wanted details on how these players constructed and kept their personal histories of their *COTG* federations, including how they envisioned and documented matches and interviews within the diegesis of their own wrestling federation. Equally pertinent to this construction of subjective *COTG* experiences were the rituals that people performed while playing the game. I was curious about how these fans set up their matches, where and when they played matches, and any other particularities to their experience of the game.

The *COTG* questionnaire begins by asking respondents how long they have played the game. The vast majority of those who responded are longtime fans of the game, having played since the late eighties or early nineties. Many of the answers had numerous exclamation points following the answer to this question, as these tenured *COTG* fans took great pride in the temporal investment they have made to the game and community. These invested years are representative of subcultural capital in this fan community, as these fans have accumulated a status within the community due to their years of involvement with the game (Thornton, 1996). A noteworthy example of this accumulated status is Mark Ashby, whose years of dedication to *COTG* and its fan community afforded him the opportunity to write an expansion edition set in the universe of the game based on a federation known as the CPC (later to be known as the POW and featuring mixed-martial arts). Ashby's ascension to the top of the subcultural hierarchy of this fan community was due to his tenure in the community, as well as his creative ability as his game editions are championed by many fans of the game.

The long relationship between many in the *COTG* fan community to the game is indicative of how the game reached wrestling fans in the late eighties and early nineties. When

interviewing many respondents, most echoed my own narrative of how I found out about the game, citing advertisements in the pages of wrestling magazines such as *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* in the days before the internet. These fans would even indicate which advertisement it was that hooked them by recalling the specific character that adorned the ad, just as I did by citing the “Bishop Hell” character earlier in this chapter. This easy recollection of the specific advertisement that captured the imagination of these fans in their youth is indicative of the close relationship these fans develop with specific characters in the game, characters that they inject life into via their individual gameplay. This connection between characters and players is responsible for the loyalty of many of these fans, as these respondents have invested many years of their lives, as well as significant economic capital since each edition costs at least ten dollars, with the game and its characters. That the game also reached many of these fans in their youths also indicates a nostalgic component to this relationship, perhaps connoting a more innocent or simple time in these players’ lives before the responsibilities of adulthood (a sentiment that was mentioned on more than one occasion by respondents). This nostalgia is echoed by the admiration many fans have for the earlier editions in the game, editions they played when they were younger game fans. However, there were numerous responses that championed more recent editions of the game, arguing that the game has improved with time and the addition of newer characters with interesting card mechanics. One fan even argued that the game was at its best when under the helm of its own fans, as the preponderance of bootleg characters (or those not created by Tom Filsinger) provided a diversity to the game that was lacking in previous years.

A couple of the respondents indicated that they had strayed from the game at various points during their lives, but always returned when life and time permitted them to come back.

One fan stated that the game was “comforting” since he always knew he could pick up the dice and play no matter how long it had been since he played last. Another fan, due to his long relationship with the game, claimed that the game was a presence in monumental experiences in his life, including his college years, his marriage, and the birth of his first child. This continued presence made his experience of the game meaningful, to use Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) term, or deep, to use Geertz’ (1973) famous term from his study of Balinese cockfighting. However, not every respondent in the study maintained such a long history with the game. Several indicated that they got into the game within the past ten years, although many who made this assertion were markedly younger (late-teens and twenties) than the longtime fans with significant subcultural capital (who were at least in their thirties and often older than that). A couple of these respondents who were younger were either friends with Tom Filsinger’s children or had taken advantage of the jumping on point to the game’s current mythology with the 2119 game edition entitled “New Beginning 2119,” which was released in 2004.

I asked members of the game community whether they played *Champions of the Galaxy* alone or with others. With one notable exception, every person who took part in the study indicated that they play the game alone, unless they are at the annual Galacticon convention.¹⁷² The reason for this solitary experience of the game was due to the small number of people familiar with Filsinger’s universe, according to many I interviewed. Many fans declared that if more people knew about the game then there would be more opportunities to share in the game. I often pressed this notion further in the in-depth phone interviews and many admitted that when

¹⁷² A few respondents also stated that they play the game at other game conventions that they organize closer to where they live. These conventions usually consist of a few fans of *COTG* coming together to share a weekend and play the game. Some examples of these smaller conventions include GalactiCan, which is the Canadian version of Galacticon, and OhioCon, for fans of the game who live in Ohio.

they have shared the game with others these prospective players were often disinterested, reflecting the fact that this game appeals to a small niche of fans within the larger subculture of wrestling fans, which is still a subculture in itself. Others who I interviewed about whether they play the game alone or with others expressed a sense of shame towards their fandom of *Champions of the Galaxy*. These fans were often adamant that they do not share this hobby with any “outsiders” to the *COTG* fan community. One fan stated that it took him “years” before he was willing to share this hobby with his girlfriend, and when she was okay with his “geeky” pastime he decided to marry her. This response, while an extreme case, was echoed again and again from many of the people in the study, as there was certainly a secrecy to their *COTG* experience. The genre of wrestling itself inspires some to feel ashamed, as we have seen throughout this project. *COTG* adds an added level of shame as players grapple with an internalized shame about wrestling and play itself, recalling the rhetoric of frivolity identified by Sutton-Smith. Within our culture frivolity is marginalized, and for many in the fan community the fact that they make time to play the game is something they may feel ashamed of. The fan community also seemed acutely aware that this game merited little cultural capital outside of the fan community, but within the community the amount of time and devotion one had to the game and its history translated into subcultural capital within the community.

Many of the people who took part in the study remarked that this solitary experience of the game was the norm, but at least once a year the game was a communal experience when fans would congregate in Jamestown, New York for the annual Galacticon convention. At the convention fans would reconnect with others they had not seen all year and take part in tournaments with the game’s various characters. Specific fans were in charge of running specific tournaments, and fans would pick names out of a hat to determine which character they would

use in the tournament. Many fans came to the convention with their own cards in tow, as well as their own dice. Once they had been assigned a character they would make sure they had the card for that character in their possession and then find the person who they were facing in the tournament.¹⁷³ These two would then find a space to play their match, which usually involved some negotiation over which rules were to be followed and which to be ignored. Once the match was over the victor would report to the person running the particular tournament the result and learn of his next opponent in the tournament while the loser would transition into a member of the audience watching as others in the community rolled the dice for their matches. By the time the tournament final was ready, a large crowd was around to serve as spectators for the climactic encounter, mirroring a true wrestling audience as they cheered their favorite (character or community member) during the match.

Each match at Galacticon usually involved some negotiation and compromise. After all, this game was usually played in a solitary manner, and Galacticon necessitated turning this solitary experience into a communal one. Members of the game community often establish “house rules” for their experience of the game, and at Galacticon those house rules had to be abandoned, at least to some degree. For example, the characters in the game all have various chart options that can be rolled at the discretion of the player called “Choice Charts.” Many members of the community find these charts overly complicated while others adamantly declare that in order to play the game correctly you must “always” use these choice charts. This discrepancy between those who swear by the sanctity of the choice charts and those who choose

¹⁷³ There was one fan who went by the moniker of Jim Steel who had every card that Filsinger Games had produced and if a fan did not have their own copy of a card for use in the tournament they would have to see Jim Steel to borrow his copy of the card. Jim Steel’s economic investment into Filsinger Games’ commodities ensured him a privileged status at Galacticon, as he always had a crowd around him begging to borrow one card or another.

to ignore them results in a negotiation before each match at Galacticon where the two players, especially if they are relatively unfamiliar with each other, decide if they should use these charts. In order to not rile up the choice charts' most ardent supporters, these negotiations are often done quietly, and in most instances the charts are used when one participant in the match is adamant about using them. These moments of negotiation and modification of the rules of the game play a significant role in the way the concept of play helps us understand the practices of media audiences.

The Galacticon experience of playing *Champions of the Galaxy* with other members of the community is reserved for those who make the trek to Jamestown each year. For most in the community, *COTG* remains a solitary experience. There was one huge exception to the solitary experience of the game amongst those who participated in the study, and this exception demonstrates how the fluidity of rules allows for unexpected experiences of the game/content. One fan stated that not only was his normal experience of the game a communal one, but that he could not imagine playing the game alone. For him, *Champions of the Galaxy* was something he shared with his best friend since 1989. Once a week he and his friend get together and play the game as a competition between the two, which is the way they have always played the game. He described this experience of the game to me in great detail, stating that they draft certain characters to their team and then have them compete against each other, making the game a strategy contest between two friends who try to match up the characters in a way that will earn their team points. When a new edition comes out they draft characters to their team based on the needs or deficiencies of their own stable of characters, as well as to give them an advantage over their opponent. This involves much preparation and study, according to the respondent, making the game a cerebral experience with actual winners and losers as opposed to the simulation of

wrestling for the enjoyment of the individual player that others use the game for. Most fascinating of all, this respondent stated that his favorite aspect of the game over these years is the relationship he cultivated with his friend and opponent in *Champions of the Galaxy*, as the game brought the two of them together and kept them tied to each other as their lives changed and they grew apart from others. This example indicates both the unexpected nature of ethnography, as this response was wholly unexpected and he was considered an anomaly by other members of the community, as well as the heterotopian potential of using media in unexpected ways, as the rules of the game were fluid enough that these two fans were able to adapt them to suit their own interests and tastes.

The solitary nature of most community members' playing *Champions of the Galaxy* is reflected in the rituals many have for when and where they play the game. Once again there was no absolute uniformity, but many members of the community seem to find a space of solitude for when they play the game, retreating to their basement or bedroom to simulate wrestling matches in the intergalactic future. I found these reports similar to Radway's account of romance novel readers who were determined to mark out time for themselves through their romance reading, as these players often confessed to separating themselves from others in their household in order to take time for something that was purely for their enjoyment. Mirroring Radway's account of romance readers, these players were also taking a stand against the rhetoric of play as frivolity that Sutton-Smith identifies, as the practice was not frivolous to them and was instead quite valuable. This focus on pleasing the individual is echoed in the game itself, as players can simulate their own *COTG* federation and modify it according to their own tastes and preferences. In this way, *COTG*'s connection to the solitary experience of the player imbues the play with a sort of hedonistic or self-indulgent property. This self-indulgence seems to be almost shameful

for some in the community, as they sneak away and refuse to share the experience with others for fear of being criticized. For others, however, it is a mark of defiance or pride, as several members of the community remarked that they play the game whenever and wherever possible, often traveling with their cards and dice and stealing moments when they can to “roll some matches.” And for every person who discussed how they play the game alone and isolated from others in their home, there were others who talked about how they position themselves in the center of their homes with their families around (and occasionally watching) and play the game, often confiscating the kitchen table after dinner and simulating wrestling matches with the characters in *COTG*.

Another interesting facet of the rituals that members of the *COTG* community have regarding their playing the game is how static many of them were. Most fans I talked with indicated that they have very concrete practices that must be followed when they play the game. Further, they stated that they don’t even think about the rituals at this point, unless they are in an unfamiliar setting when they play the game (like at Galacticon). For example, many fans stated how they have a certain time when they most often play the game, such as late at night or when professional wrestling is on television. One simple reason for this consistent scheduling is the intrusion of responsibilities like employment and parental duties, making their gameplaying possible only when other responsibilities have been met. Others remarked that having wrestling on television gets them in the mood to simulate their own matches, and since they watch wrestling at the same time every week that scheduling dictates when they feel like playing the game.¹⁷⁴ But in many instances it is more than scheduling, as the appeal of the ritual is the reassuring aspect the structure provides the player. The ritual playing of the game may connect

¹⁷⁴ Of course, one fan indicated that he no longer plays at the same time every week since he acquired a DVR and can watch *Monday Night Raw* any time he wants.

the player to the person they were as a child, revealing a sense of nostalgia for another time that provides comfort for the player. The repetition of the ritual connects the player to another time, and since so many of the players of *COTG* expressed their extensive history with the game, the ritual of playing connects them to various times in their individual lives.

In addition to time, many members of the *COTG* fan community discussed how they have certain practices to ready the physical space where they will play the game. A couple fans noted that they have to use a dish-towel or washcloth to put over the table to muffle the sounds of the dice hitting the surface. One fan indicated that the sounds of the dice would wake others in his household, making the accessory necessary for him to indulge in the game without negatively impacting those around him. Another fan was less cognizant of the need for the towel, but that did not deter him from using it throughout his many years playing the game. He stated that this was just how he had always played the game, and saw no need to change after all these years. This adherence to static rituals manifests itself in the placement of the actual cards as well, as most members of the community stated that they always position the heels, or villains, on one side of the table and the babyfaces, or heroes, on the other. There was no consensus among the community that heels go on the left and babyfaces on the right, for example, just that on the whole each community member had their own personal ritual that placed the heels to one side and the babyfaces on the left. I asked one person what happened when there were two heels or two babyfaces in his simulated match and he stated that since he puts the heels on the left and babyfaces on the right that the character that was “more heelish” would go on the left and “more faceish” on the right. Clearly this was a subjective interpretation based on his own reading and generation of the character, but for him there were intricacies of these characters that he could distinguish between and subsequently categorize them according to their villainous or heroic

characteristics. And players were free to root for whoever they wanted to in an individual match, although their allegiances are primarily to the enjoyment of the game over a particular babyface or heel character.

These rituals extended even to the dice that many players used when playing the game, as most fans indicated that they had special dice reserved for when they were simulating matches in the game. The game originally came with two miniature dice included with the instructions for how to play, and many fans proudly declared that they still had those exact dice and used them exclusively for playing *COTG*. One of these dice was red and the other was blue, and fan after fan indicated that they always associated one color with the heels and the other with the babyfaces. Once again, there was no consensus within the community, as some used the blue die for the heels and the red for the babyfaces while others used the red for the heels and the blue for the babyfaces. What was consistent was how static each individual community member was, as they claimed that they always associate one color with heroes and the other with villains, and there were no exceptions to this dichotomy. Those fans who had lost their red and blue dice had in some instances replaced those dice with replicas – searching for red and blue dice to continue the rituals that they had done since they began playing the game. Others stated that they “upgraded” and had purchased specialty dice from game and hobby shops with distinct colors, shapes, and images decorating the accessories. At Galacticon, one fan even brought a case full of specialty dice to share with the community, although this was also a case of conspicuous consumption in that this display was sure to get him noticed within the community at large.

While there was no consensus concerning the particularities of individual rituals within the community, there was a consensus from those I interviewed concerning how to track the history of each individual player’s federation. Starting with the original edition, the main

wrestling federation in the diegetic universe of *Champions of the Galaxy* is the GWF (Galactic Wrestling Federation). Each individual player of the game has their own GWF federation, and as they play through each edition they add to the mythology and history of their own version of the GWF. In some player's GWF, certain characters experience great success, while in other players' federations those characters may have entirely different career trajectories. Each member of the community attempts to track this evolution of their individual federation, creating a history of their iteration of the GWF and charting the careers of various characters in the game. Every person I spoke with attested to their own attempts to chronicle this history, which is essentially their own history of playing the game. They write up accounts of the matches they simulate and keep track of how characters progress or regress through their careers. There are certainly discrepancies regarding how much detail to include in these histories, however. Some fans state that they transcribe the matches practically move-for-move, creating an account that lists out each dice roll in the match. Others state that they only list the maneuver that resulted in one character defeating another at the conclusion of the match. Still others stated that they list out how the match went, even assigning it a star rating just as members of the IWC (Internet Wrestling Community) did for matches in real wrestling companies like WWE and ROH. These histories vary depending on the subjectivity of the individual player, and they also change through time as the tastes of the individual player changes.¹⁷⁵ What was consistent was the desire to craft a narrative of these characters in this universe that added depth to the play experience, making it deep/meaningful for the player.

¹⁷⁵ This changing of an individual player's tastes often leads to the player starting their individual federation over from scratch. The most frequent reason given to me as to why they restarted their federation was that they wanted more detail in their history and had failed to provide that detail when they had played the game at a younger age. Others in the community vehemently disagreed with restarting their game, as they stated that it was impossible to erase their memories of using certain characters.

Another similarity between the various respondents to my questionnaire involves the imagination of each player being an integral component of their *COTG* experience. The game requires each player to imagine the characters engaging in a professional wrestling encounter, as there is no visual referent of a ring or of the characters performing wrestling maneuvers. Instead, all that is available to *COTG* players are the aforementioned static cards with black-and-white images of the characters fixed in a singular pose and words that refer to wrestling maneuvers.¹⁷⁶ This leaves the actual match up to the individual player, as he must imagine the maneuvers being performed when playing the game in their own imagination. For some, they stated that they actually try to visualize the match as it plays out with each dice roll, focusing on each and every roll and how the characters would appear as if it was an actual wrestling match. For others, they roll the dice more mechanically and try to get to the result of the match, visualizing the maneuvers at the end of the match that led to its conclusion but not bothering to stop and ponder each and every roll of the dice. How they use their imagination is up to the individual player, but what is consistent is that all *COTG* players must imagine these matches since there is nothing provided by the game itself to serve as a visual referent of wrestling combat.

This use of the imagination of the player extends to how many imagine each character giving interviews (cutting promos) when they are playing the game. It is not a required feature of the game (little is actually required) but many feel it makes their experience of the game deeper (Geertz, 1973) or more meaningful (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Some respondents indicated that they transcribe the words of each character's imaginary interview, getting themselves in the role of that character before silently delivering a promo in the voice of this

¹⁷⁶ Starting with the 2126 game edition released in 2010, the products produced by Filsinger himself are now in color. This conversion to color cards was greeted by most in the community as a positive step forward for the game, but for others it was seen as a less positive transition.

imaginary character. For example, one fan stated that, “each character has a unique voice, and I imagine the words of an interview coming in the tone of voice of that character.” Other fans confessed to a similar process, but stated that they do not take the time to write down these imaginary interviews verbatim since it takes away from valuable time for rolling the dice and actually playing the game by simulating matches. When pressed, one fan stated that these imaginary promos are more important than the actual matches, as it is when crafting these promos that he felt like he was in complete control of the character. He stated that, “I take Tom’s (Filsinger) characters and give them life.” Several fans stated that they often think of promos when they are going to sleep at night, imagining a character giving an interview promoting an upcoming match they have scheduled on a future card. This focus on delivering a promo in the voice of a character mirrors the process of delivering wrestling promos described by wrestler Mick Foley (1999) in his autobiography, as Foley detailed how he would go over his character’s lines and get in the mind of his wrestling character prior to delivering his performance. By imagining the promos of these imaginary characters, *COTG* players are playing the role of both wrestler and booker/writer simultaneously. They are engaging their Jungian shadow within Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of play as Self while also stepping outside of that shadow persona and acting as an omniscient booker of wrestling matches. All of this imagining has no visual correspondent, as it takes place completely in the minds of those who play the game. But just like wrestling fans at live events or on the internet, these fans are fantasy booking their own narratives and devoting time and energy into how they envision the genre of wrestling should be performed. Their iterations of the GWF are certainly influenced by contemporary (or historical for that matter) wrestling they have seen, but simultaneously the GWF provides an opportunity for them to imagine a subjectively superior version of the wrestling genre.

The final question I asked in this section devoted to personal information and rituals of *COTG* fans pertained to their interests outside of *Champions of the Galaxy*, particularly their thoughts on professional wrestling. As expected, the fans of this game were fans of all sorts of other media, including other games. One fan stated that he loved *COTG* because of its similarity to *Strat-O-Matic Baseball*, which is his favorite game. Another fan stated that he liked to create the characters from *COTG* in wrestling games from WWE such as *WWE Raw vs. Smackdown* for the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 consoles. And as expected, most fans of *COTG* were also fans of wrestling, although their evaluative criteria of the wrestling genre was as diverse as the criteria explored in the previous chapter of this project. Many fans adamantly supported WWE since they were the contemporary leaders of the wrestling genre with the most high-profile stature in the world. Another reason commonly cited for supporting WWE was that it was the company that these fans grew up with, mirroring their devotion to *COTG* since it was a product of their childhood. There was also some consternation concerning WWE within this fan community, as many stated that they were currently frustrated with contemporary wrestling, most specifically WWE. These fans loved *COTG* because it offered a respite from WWE's product. With *COTG*, fans could create a wrestling federation that was more to their liking, a true alternative to the model of wrestling that appears on television. One fan in particular stated that he tries to watch *Monday Night Raw* occasionally, and all that happens is that he appreciates *COTG* a bit more than he did before because of enduring WWE's product. I actually anticipated most of the responses mirroring this one, with *COTG* serving as an alternative for dissatisfied wrestling fans. The responses I received, however, were evenly mixed between those fans who were frustrated with wrestling on television and those who ardently supported WWE and used their product as inspiration for their *COTG* experience. Those who were frustrated with WWE mirrored many of

the complaints detailed in chapter two, focusing on how the popular aesthetic of WWE does not match their personal aesthetic paradigm. Some fans did mention that their *COTG* fed mirrors ROH (and other independent wrestling promotions), while others expressed a nostalgia to wrestling promotions that no longer exist as the basis for how they imagine their *COTG* fed (most often referring to World Class Championship Wrestling, which was based out of Texas and syndicated in many markets around the country in the 1980s, and Jim Crockett Promotions, which ran in the southeast and was affiliated with the National Wrestling Alliance [NWA] before being purchased by Ted Turner and renamed World Championship Wrestling [WCW] in the late 1980s).

This modeling of an open text like *COTG* on WWE's product was baffling at first, as I reasoned that the options to innovate or break from the type of wrestling that was readily available through WWE made *COTG* a prime destination for dissatisfied fans. That so many used WWE as a model to learn from was an unexpected result of this study, another example of how ethnography often provides data that is wholly unexpected to the ethnographer. Many fans of *COTG* did not champion the openness of play's possibilities, instead looking for a proven formula that could be applied to their own fantasy booking. These fans were not playing the game incorrectly. They were simply playing it for different reasons and searching for different experiences. These fans wanted to quantify their *COTG* experience, basing it off of a product that had demonstrated quantifiable success in the wrestling genre, as we saw in the previous chapter. My miscalculation of these fans' reasons for enjoying *COTG* demonstrates the necessity of a concept like play to understand what these fans are doing with this media text. Rather than the open form of play that I was searching for, some of these fans were using the rules to structure their play. Through this structure these fans could reason that their experience

of *COTG* was the most productive and the most closely related to their favorite wrestling promotion. This focus on rules versus freedom will be explored further in the next section, which examines the ways that game fans play. Some take the rules of the game, as well as the game's features, and completely usurp them for their own purposes, while others cling to these rules as if they were a source of identity for the player. This tension reveals the utility of play as a concept, as both sides of this dichotomy are able to equally take pleasure from the same text despite their fundamental, and seemingly irreconcilable, differences.

"It's Your Fed, Promoter" - Playing *Champions of the Galaxy*

Champions of the Galaxy is a useful text for understanding the "resistance" of players and how comprehending the practices of media audiences involves an appreciation of play as a concept, since *COTG* is itself a game. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) discuss this notion of resistance in *Rules of Play*, stating that, "games are always already play, an activity that explores and expands structures, stretching and re-forming them"(p. 565). In their discussion of play, the play act itself is inherently creative, a renegotiation of the rules encoded in the game's text by players who seek to modify the game to suit their own goals or interests. Known as "modding" or "mods" in the field of game studies, these modifications to a (video) game's structure can be seen as celebrated acts of resistance (Jenkins, 2006) or as a threat to the nature of the game itself, stripping its identity as a game with a formal set of rules (Galloway, 2006). Mods represent both of these dichotomous relations simultaneously, as they are expressions of play that can be evaluated as both a freedom from rules and as a threat to those very rules that define the game, making those players an integral object of study. While great attention has been

paid in the field of game studies to flashy video games, little attention has been directed towards less visual forms of gaming. As we shall see, the *COTG* audience demonstrates the necessity of the play concept for understanding the practices of this audience, as they wrestle with the possibilities of the game that are both limited and offered by the rules built into the game. And acts of resistance to these rules are met with tremendous hostility, despite the inherent subjectivity of the game's offered pleasures. Although the game and its creators espouse a rhetoric of modification and possibility, there seem to be several mechanisms in place to structure the experience of the game in the wake of the threat/promise of play.

The universe of Filsinger's *Champions of the Galaxy* is one of immense space where players can add their own creations. *The GWF Files* (2002) chronicles these creations by devoting several pages to bootleg characters created by fans and then distributed to others in the community at game conventions like Galacticon and via the mail, before the emergence of online content for *COTG*. They are called "Promoter-Made" characters. Game fan Mark Ashby states that, "the phenomenon undoubtedly began sometime in the first week after the arrival of the original 500 sets into the hands of the earliest purchasers of *Champions of the Galaxy*. Two or three cards into 2087 somebody said, 'Hey, what if I added this character?'" (2002, p. 9). Ashby then goes on to describe many of the earliest Promoter-Made characters that were heavily circulated by *COTG* fans such as "Akuma the Ninja" and "Crow," as well as debates within the community regarding the "strength" of these Promoter-Made characters' cards. Inflating the statistics of these bootleg characters was a great concern to many in the community, as several respondents to my study indicated that the reason they did not use bootlegs in their federations was because they felt the cards were often too "stacked" and would dominate the characters already in the game. However, many others stated that they used Promoter-Made characters in

certain situations during their time playing the game, claiming that these cards could fill a roster slot in their federations and provide an alternative when the game was feeling dull. Rather than wait for the next edition and new characters, these fans would use a bootleg character to add some variety to their *COTG* experience. These bootlegs were either self-created (in many instances) or one of the more established bootleg characters distributed throughout the community.¹⁷⁷ Several people noted that they used bootlegs they created themselves by finding a picture in a magazine (pre-internet) or online and pasting it to cardstock to serve as the front of the cards, and then adding their own statistics to the backs of the cards. In addition, many game fans experimented with drawing the pictures of their Promoter-Made characters themselves, as well as commissioning an artist to draw their characters for them in some instances. The more professional-looking the card, the more likely it was to be shared within the community as a recognizable Promoter-Made character, although many confessed that they often had a roster of poorly drawn characters in a separate federation when they played the game. This resistance to including too many bootleg characters with the characters officially produced by Filsinger Games indicates the loyalty and fidelity many in the community have for the game and for Filsinger himself, as they seemed deeply resistant to intermixing their own (or others') creations with those offered by Filsinger.

The use of bootleg characters in many fans' *COTG* federations reveals the immense nature of the universe of the game. Filsinger himself took advantage of this openness by expanding the number of federations within the *COTG*-verse, adding official game releases focused on federations like the Colby-Pelf Corporation (CPC) and All-Centra Essence (aCe).

¹⁷⁷ Many noted that their use of bootleg characters increased greatly with the emergence of the internet, as Promoter-Made characters were more readily available and distributed due to this digital technology.

These editions were spin-offs from the narratives presented in his Galactic Wrestling Federation (GWF) editions, allowing him to introduce new characters and mix them in with his established creations. After establishing these expansion sets, he turned the reins over to well-known fans within the community. Starting with the 2112 game edition in 2005, game fan and newsletter editor Mark Ashby began crafting the narrative of the CPC editions, ascending into an exalted role within the *COTG* fan community by crossing over into the role of an official producer of Filsinger Games. Fan Kris Osk made this same transition in 2005 by taking over the aCe federation. This transition into an official role within the Filsinger Games hierarchy was demonstrated at Galacticon, as prior to becoming official writers for these editions the only person who conducted a “Question and Answer” session before the assembled collection of *COTG* fans was Filsinger himself. After they began producing their own officially sanctioned content, Ashby and Osk began to also be allowed time to answer questions from the fans at Galacticon, although it was clearly Filsinger who was positioned as the main event and given the most time to discuss the GWF. And the hierarchy was even clearer within the worlds of the individual federations, as the CPC and aCe were clearly the secondary federations to the GWF, even down to the strength of the cards of the wrestlers who inhabited each federation.

This expansion of the *COTG* universe arguably peaked with the advent of the “Promoter Madness” editions, as these editions allowed for fans who attended Galacticon to contribute characters to an expansion set for the game’s universe. The federation that housed these creations was known as the GWFZ, or GWFZone, a theoretical developmental federation where the future stars of the GWF would be trained, mirroring a farm-league in Major League Baseball or Florida Championship Wrestling (FCW) for WWE in contemporary wrestling. This structure continued the obvious placement of Filsinger’s GWF at the forefront of this mythical universe,

ensuring that Filsinger would not lose his position atop the fan community devoted to his creation. The GWFZ was the culmination of many fans' desires to follow in fellow-fans Ashby and Osk's footsteps, making the transition, with a single character, into the role of an official producer of content for Filsinger Games. As mentioned previously, my Hegemony character was included in the original Promoter Madness set, an accolade that ostracized me further from many in the community at that time since I was claiming a heavily coveted spot over others in attendance at Galacticon. But Promoter Madness demonstrates the expansiveness of this universe, since many of these fans had ideas for their forthcoming characters when they arrived at Galacticon that year. Further, many fans made officially recognized cards for characters they had already made cards for in their own personal GWF federations. By having Filsinger Games produce an official card of one of their creations, it served as a validation of one of their ideas, an opportunity for their personal play to be shared within the community and exist alongside the creations of Filsinger.

Given the inherent openness of the *COTG* universe and the propensity for many game fans to include their own homemade characters, as well as those created by fellow members of the *COTG* fan community, I reasoned that many would also customize the characters produced by Filsinger himself. After all, much of the online discourse I observed from members of the *COTG* fan community focused on the favorite characters of fellow promoters and how they wondered what would have happened if that character was given a further upgrade or was not retired by Filsinger at a certain point. We will address the notion of writing out certain characters shortly, but the consternation many seemed to feel regarding a favorite character being downgraded or not given the desired upgrade statistically was a constant. For example, one fan on the online forum stated that the character "American Guy is in serious need of a new card,"

referring to the character needing updated statistics and a new direction for his character.¹⁷⁸ I assumed that many of these fans who feel that a character needs tweaking would do it themselves, altering the cards to suit their own purposes. After all, Tom Filsinger himself often states that with *Champions of the Galaxy* you can do what you want since it is “Your Federation, Promoter.”¹⁷⁹

Rather than finding numerous fans who altered the officially produced *Champions of the Galaxy* cards/characters, instead I found tremendous resistance to that idea among most in the community who participated in the project. There were a few respondents who confessed to making a “slight” tweak to a character’s statistics, including making a level three offensive maneuver into a level two offensive maneuver (and weakening the character) or vice versa and altering the power or agility statistics for a particular character, but on the whole most in the community were steadfast in their resolve to never adjust the statistics of an officially produced Filsinger character. One fan explained that he “know(s) how much work Tom puts into every facet of the game cards, and to change that would be to undermine Tom’s wishes.” Similarly, another fan expressed that, “the characters are awesome as it is, and Tom certainly knows more about his characters than I do.” These responses demonstrate the high esteem many members of the *Champions of the Galaxy* fan community have for Tom Filsinger and his creations, as even if they are personally unsatisfied with a particular character they refuse to alter that character’s statistics to make him or her stronger or weaker in the diegesis of the game. One fan, when pressed on this issue, stated that he felt that if he disliked a certain character with really strong

¹⁷⁸ Cman. (2010, May 5). Who Needs a New Card in 2125? Message posted to <http://filsingergames.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=gwf&action=display&thread=7627&page=2>.

¹⁷⁹ For example, this iconic line from *Champions of the Galaxy* creator Tom Filsinger can be found on the official Filsinger Games website at <http://www.filsingergames.com/cotg/faq.php>.

statistics, it makes when the character loses all the more “significant” since another character was able to defeat a strong card. This response echoes the rationale many wrestling fans in real life would say regarding the defeat of a heel character or a performer that was disliked for personal reasons. Several other fans focused on the pristine nature of the game as a commodity, stating that to write on the game cards would decrease their aesthetic appearance, something they refused to do. Many fans go to great lengths to preserve the aesthetic properties of their game cards, including placing the cards in plastic sleeves to keep them from deteriorating, mirroring the practices of many fans of comics.

What some game fans were willing to alter about the characters produced by Filsinger were the personalities of the characters. Since Filsinger offers merely a few sentences about each character in the handbooks for each edition, it seems that many fans are willing to adjust their personalities since many of the characters’ “voices” comes from the imagination of each individual player. Many fans stated that they feel very comfortable turning a particular character from a heel into a babyface, or the other way around, over the course of a given game year. One fan stated that he turned the character “Star Warrior,” who played a heroic babyface in Filsinger’s official narratives of the GWF, into a “whiny heel” since he always saw him that way based on his card’s artwork. This fan refused to alter Star Warrior’s statistics, but he did change the narrative context for that character and accentuated parts of the character that stood out to him, altering the fundamental aspect of the character’s motivations within the diegesis of his GWF experience. Another fan echoed these sentiments, but was more faithful to Filsinger’s conception of a character when new editions were released. For example, this respondent stated that he would often have various characters turn from heel or babyface during a given game year, but when it came time for a new edition to be released he would follow the characterization

presented by Tom Filsinger, meaning that he would have to turn the character back to fit within the character's depiction by Filsinger in the official game handbook.

Many in the *COTG* fan community are so faithful to Filsinger's narrative that they insist on using each and every character introduced in each game edition, even the characters they are not as enamored with. Since *COTG* features individual wrestling cards for each character, I figured that most in the community would pick and choose the characters they liked best and use those characters' cards while ignoring the characters they did not like. This way, their experience of the game would be subjectively pleasurable for the individual player, selecting the characters they enjoyed playing with and ignoring those they felt were poorly created or were less fun to use in their individual federation. And certainly there were several respondents who behaved in this way, citing certain characters that they found problematic and stating that they decided to ignore the character rather than incorporate it into their individual federation. For example, one respondent stated that he found a character known as "Gila" a poor fit for their GWF since he wrestled on four legs instead of two, requiring a suspension of disbelief that was impractical for their enjoyment of the game. Another fan claimed that if he did not like the art of a character he often did not include him or her into his personal federation.

Overall, however, I found that most respondents had the opposite approach to these aforementioned fans and insisted that they use each character introduced by Filsinger. The overwhelming majority of my respondents claimed that they use every character in the game regardless of their personal feelings for the character, although many also claimed that characters they prefer get more of a "push" by being given more opportunities in their federation than characters they do not like. One fan stated that he considers himself the "booker" rather than the "owner" of his federation, meaning he is often left to find something for a character to do that is

meaningful regardless of whether he would have “signed” the character to his roster. In this way, some fans take these characters as a personal and creative challenge, something for them to work around to have an enjoyable experience with the game rather than a means to facilitate that experience. Another fan echoed this response by stating that, “I find my creativity is taking existing setups and creations and using them in exciting ways.” These fans saw themselves as creators within the *COTG* universe more so than creators of that universe. However, many fans admitted that they use all of the characters introduced by Filsinger because of Filsinger’s authority within the community as its originator, stating that, “With Tom’s writing, why would I not use all of the characters,” and “Hell yeah I use them all, why not?” This loyalty to the game and its creator is a hallmark of this fan community, as they are fully committed to the game and the man who has been at the helm of its narrative for twenty-five years.

This faithfulness to the characters created by Filsinger extends to the narratives introduced in the official game handbooks of each edition for many of the fans of *COTG*. Each handbook, as mentioned previously, introduces the characters in the game and briefly discusses the feuds and allies of each character. These handbooks serve as the blueprint for each year in the GWF, letting the player know which characters are active that year and how the player should use that character going forward. Of course, this narrative is merely a guideline, as players are free to diverge from these narratives at any point in their own iteration of the GWF. And in many ways this divergence is encouraged because it would become monotonous, as many fans indicated in their responses, for players to keep running the same matches over and over again in their GWF because Filsinger only indicated one or two feuds for each character in the handbook. Many of the respondents in this study stated that they use Filsinger’s narratives as a “starting point” for each game year and build their GWF from there, often pitting characters

against each other that have no interaction in the official handbooks distributed by Filsinger.

One fan indicated that this is his favorite aspect of the game, as unexpected feuds develop between some characters that are never explored in the official handbooks produced by Filsinger, providing a true sense of authorship over his personal GWF experience.

Several fans I spoke with proudly stated that they stray extensively from the narratives provided by Filsinger, as they feel that the game is theirs and it would be impossible to completely affix their GWF to Tom's due to years of personal narrative development. One person said that he made the decision years ago to turn a tag team known as "The Greek Gods" from babyfaces to heels despite them never becoming heels in the official game handbooks. The result was that this single experimentation had a ripple effect on his GWF, as he loved the command he had over this single decision so much that he began experimenting with other characters and their characteristics. Now, many years later, he stated that his GWF barely resembles the one that Tom describes in the official game handbooks. Another fan echoed these sentiments in terms of writing characters out of the game. In the 2119 game edition Tom Filsinger dropped a popular character known as "Euritar" from the GWF. Many game fans were shocked at this move, as the character was one of the more celebrated within the community and was still in his "prime" according to many fans. Because of this decision, many in the community followed suit and also wrote Euritar out of their own GWF narratives. However, this fan stated that, "I loved Euritar, and he was my champion at the time. Why should I drop him when I love using him?" Rather than stop using one of his favorite characters from the game simply because Filsinger stopped mentioning him, this fan decided to continue enjoying the character. In this way, he was embodying the notion of "fantasy booking" mentioned in the previous chapter, as he saw a development in the game's diegesis and disagreed with the

decision. Rather than simply going along with the decision to drop Euritar, this fan decided that in his subjectively perfect GWF that Euritar was still a prominent character. Since that decision, this fan indicated that he has made “many similar decisions, including bringing back other older characters that he felt left the GWF too early.” This fan was seizing authorship of the GWF from Filsinger and molding the game according to his own tastes, fantasy booking the GWF as he would if he was indeed the creator of the game himself.

While several others in the community echoed these sentiments and molded the GWF according to their own preferences, many in the community were too loyal to Filsinger and the game to abandon his narratives completely. Even when fans embellished certain aspects of characters to make them more of their own, they still were faithful to the characterization presented by Filsinger. For example, many fans stated that they would never turn a character heel or babyface unless Tom Filsinger did it in an official capacity. This fidelity to Filsinger is best exemplified in the *COTG* narrative known as “Sudden Death,” which is a two-edition narrative that has appeared three times in the *COTG* mythos. In Sudden Death, teams of wrestling characters do battle in the game over two editions and at the end of the second edition the losing team has a member banished from the game. The winners of Sudden Death are determined by votes that Filsinger receives from fans, and after tallying these votes Filsinger writes the next edition and reveals the results.¹⁸⁰ What is fascinating about this narrative is that obviously not every player’s individual federation matches up perfectly with the consensus reached by the community and tallied by Filsinger. The result is that many fans run the Sudden Death narrative in their individual federation over two game years and at the end the results of

¹⁸⁰ Tom Filsinger (2005) has repeatedly claimed that the results of his “Sudden Death” game editions are completely legitimate, including in his autobiography entitled *The Dark Menace of the Universe*.

their own Sudden Death experience does not match the results presented in the official game handbooks. A few fans stated that their individual federation's results supercedes the narrative in the handbook and they simply ignore the narrative presented by Filsinger. Many more, however, stated that they follow Filsinger's results despite not arriving at the same destination in their own experience. The result is they have to completely ignore their own federation's internal logic and pretend that their subjective experience did not happen so that they can stay consistent with Filsinger's narrative. One fan stated that he finds Sudden Death "a challenge," forcing him to be very creative to find a way to match up his federation with Filsinger's when there is a discrepancy between his results and the reported results from the rest of the *COTG* community.

This notion of a "challenge" emerges in unexpected locales due to *COTG* being a non-traditional game. This is the case since there is no way to "win" the game unless you are playing against some one competitively (and as we have seen, that is assuredly the exception rather than the norm within this fan community). The only goal is for fans to enjoy their iteration of the game, to fantasy book the GWF like they would like to see a wrestling federation in an ideal setting. And because there is no true way to win the game, many fans seem to embrace the challenge of enjoying *COTG* even when things go wrong or unexpectedly. For example, many fans remark on the message forums of the game and at Galacticon that the biggest challenge of the game is when they are building to a particular match in their personal federation and the dice do not cooperate, whether that means their upcoming title challenger loses to a character that was intended to be an opponent to be squashed leading up to the big match or if it means a character they really like seems to continually lose to lesser opponents due to unlucky dice rolls. I asked the respondents if they ever alleviated these unexpected dilemmas by ignoring certain dice rolls,

assuring that the narrative they were constructing in their own federation would come to fruition. After all, no one would ever know that the dice results were inaccurate. With very few exceptions, the response to this query was a resounding no with respondents stating things such as, “Absolutely not,” and “Never!!!!!!” when asked if they ever ignored the dice. It was as if the sanctity of the dice was fundamental to the game they loved, and to deviate from the dice was an affront to the game’s structure, recalling Sutton-Smith’s (1997) rhetoric of fate detailed in chapter one. Moreso, many fans expressed that the dice themselves are what is fun and challenging about the game, as the dice results force players to adapt to their whims, which may not be consistent with the desires of the individual player. One fan stated that, “I like to see where the dice take me,” as he claims that the dice challenge his creativity in a manner similar to the inclusion of characters that may not be exactly to his liking. In this way these fans’ fantasy booking is one that is tempered by the realities that constrain possibilities, adding a level of fun to the experience for the player as he or she attempts to arrive at an intended narrative destination.

As mentioned previously, some fans of *COTG* do modify the actual rules of the game, even if they are hesitant to modify the individual characters or narratives in many instances. This modification is most evident at Galacticon where players who are accustomed to using either all or only some of the rules of the game are forced to arrive at a consensus so that they can play the game competitively in various tournaments at the convention. This fluidity of the game’s rules is due to both how the rules are explained to the player and the solitary nature of most fans’ engagement with the game. When learning to play, new players are given both a “Basic” and “Advanced” set of rules. The Basic rules ignore all instructions in parentheses on the playing cards, including maneuvers that depend on power or agility ratings and “choice

charts.” The Advanced rules take advantage of these ratings and charts, providing a layer of subtlety to individual playing cards’ relative strength in relation to other cards in the game. These two sets of rules are then often combined by individual players, as many respondents stated that they play the Advanced rules but do not use the choice charts, for example. This customization of the game’s rules demonstrates the subjective power of the player, as he or she is able to manipulate the game to maximize his or her own pleasure/taste. Of course, there are many in the community who insist that these people who customize the rules are playing the game incorrectly.

In addition to customizing the rules of the game, many fans indicated that they also employ “house rules” when they play the game. These house rules refer to the notion that these rules are not endorsed by Filsinger Games. Instead, they are the result of play testing that has been performed by fans of the game over the years, as these fans state that they enjoy their house rules as modifications for the rules provided by the game itself. In many ways, the house rules compensate for deficiencies in the game’s rules, according to those who use them. For example, several fans stated that they enjoy characters having long title reigns, claiming that this adds prestige to the titles as fewer characters get a chance to be the champion. In order to facilitate these longer title reigns, many fans have a house rule that states champions must be pinned twice to lose their title. This way there are fewer “fluke title reigns” from lesser characters that are the beneficiaries of unexpected dice rolls. Another house rule that was mentioned several times was for all disqualifications to be rolled twice instead of one time, once again ensuring that fewer matches end with a disqualification ruling rather than a pinfall, an aesthetic that is often repeated from wrestling fans in real life who dislike inconclusive finishes to matches. These house rules are modifications to the game’s structure that accentuate the aspects of the game certain players

enjoy, while still not fundamentally changing the game's mechanics. Still, there are many in the community who refuse to accept these house rules, stating that they are not the "right way to play the game." This notion of correct and incorrect play is one that is prevalent in the *COTG* community, mirroring the debates that structure online wrestling fandom.

Champions of the Galaxy provides its fans an opportunity to fantasy book narratives with a cast of characters of wrestlers in the future. These fans can use the game to construct a wrestling federation that is suited specifically to their individual tastes and preferences, adopting certain rules, characters, and narratives and ignoring others. Each fan's GWF can feature aspects of professional wrestling they are fans of, as well as incorporate conventions from other arenas such as super heroes and science fiction (via the cosmic/supernatural powers of many of the characters). Rather than settling for the narratives of wrestling promotions in the real world, *COTG* allows for players to construct wrestling federations that borrow from certain aspects of these promotions and abandon others, forming a wrestling experience that is unique to the player. However, as discussed above there are many in the community who are resistant to the possibilities of these modifications, feeling that they are diminishing the pleasures the game provides to players. It may be each individual's "federation," but these federations reside in the universe created by Tom Filsinger, and there are rules for playing that limit the openness of the game. These limitations form the rules of the game, and these rules constitute the pleasure for many gamers in the community, even if they remove some of the possibilities of play for individual players.

A Fractured Community – *Champions of the Galaxy* and Appropriate Fantasy Booking

As we have seen, *Champions of the Galaxy* offers its players a subjective space where they can create a wrestling promotion set in the distant future that relies solely on the imagination of the player to generate wrestling matches and events. The game represents an opportunity for wrestling fans to fantasy book their own wrestling promotion, one that is evaluated solely by the individual player according to his or her own evaluative criteria. The player only has to please him or herself, rather than being beholden to shareholders, Nielsen ratings, or members of the IWC who may have opposing ideas of what constitutes a successful wrestling promotion. However, this openness of *COTG* is tempered by many in the community who insist on strict interpretations of the rules and play processes of players, demarcating what are acceptable and unacceptable forms of play for the game and its players. In this section I shall demonstrate how members of the community police the processes of members of the community, how these practices are supported by the official producers of the game, and the responses by many in the community to the play of these more forceful community members, which includes both an acceptance or acquiescence to these rules and an ostracization or “Othering” of those who resist these practices. The effect of this subcultural consternation is a microcosm of the same ideological battles that occur when audiences engage any media form, as there are intended readings and messages that are part of the official producers’ product that attempt to structure the experiences of media audiences, but every media text provides an opportunity for play by those audience members.

Champions of the Galaxy’s status as a game that targets a niche audience from the larger niche audience of wrestling fans led me to believe that the community would be fairly homogenous, a subcultural entity with widespread consensus regarding the possibilities of the game and how it offers an alternative to wrestling products seen in the real world. Instead, I

found the game's subcultural community fractured into several distinct entities scattered throughout the internet and real world. When I first began this project in 2006, many in the community went to the message forum hosted by Chris Ingersoll known as "Fans of Filsinger Games." I learned early on, however, that there was another message forum known as "The Deuce," which consisted of members of the *COTG* fan community who could not get along with many in the Fans of Filsinger Games forum (this forum no longer exists). Then, as the years progressed, an official forum was started by Filsinger's company known as the "Filsinger Games Official Message Board," which replaced the Fans of Filsinger Games forum as the space sanctioned by Filsinger himself. In addition, consternation between several forum members and the moderator of the Fans of Filsinger Games forum led to the forming of a forum known as "The Greatest Board in the Galaxy." Many in the community migrated to this forum and abandoned the Fans of Filsinger Games forum, a process that is notable considering the behavior of those who formed this new forum. With the Fans of Filsinger Games forum abandoned, several who felt unwelcome by both The Greatest Board in the Galaxy and the Filsinger Games Official Message Board formed the "Legendary Wrestling Association" message forum, which still exists. In 2011, the Filsinger Games Official Message Board merged with The Greatest Board in the Galaxy to constitute the official destination for fans of *COTG* to congregate, although many still feel unwelcome there considering the behaviors of those running the forum over the years. This splintering of a very concentrated community to start with indicates the volatility of this subculture, as well as the stakes for the game within this community. Most of the reasons for this splintering are due to different conceptions of what the game is and how it should/could be played. Rather than form an consensus or appreciate the possibilities, the

various sectors of *COTG* fans are ostracized from each other and contentious regarding the game they all love.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of this fractured community is the annual Galacticon convention. Galacticon is ideally a place where game fans get to congregate once a year and share in a text that they love or enjoy. This is made even more significant since many play the game alone, isolated from other fans of the game and often from their own friends and family. My first Galacticon experience led me to feel ostracized from the community, as I did not know anyone and it seemed that very few were interested in welcoming a new member who was not a participant in the community. My second Galacticon experience was much warmer, as my experiences as Hegemony on the various online forums devoted to the game allowed me to form relationships with many in the community prior to interacting with them in person at Galacticon in 2009. Even members of the community who I had contentious online relationships with were civil in person, as no matter the heatedness of our online debates, there was a sense of community at my second Galacticon experience. However, when I interviewed several respondents who did not attend Galacticon, I asked if they had any intention of going in the future. Their response was a resounding, “No.” One fan stated that, “I don’t think they want me there, and honestly I don’t want to waste my time.” Another argued that, “Given how welcoming they have been to me over the years, nothing sounds less pleasant than going to Jamestown and hanging out with them.” These responses demonstrate the level of isolation many feel regarding the *COTG* community, as they would rather remain outside of the annual gathering of fellow fans due to the hostility they have endured within the community. I pressed one person on whether he really believed that he would be treated poorly at the convention,

including if he felt threatened physically, and he curtly responded that, “I just don’t care any more, they can go fuck themselves.”

So what causes this distinct subculture to fracture into numerous online forums where some refrain from taking part in the annual convention due to the contentious relations within the community? While there have been several online flares on different issues, at the heart of the consternation seems to be an issue of setting the parameters of acceptable play within the community.¹⁸¹ Many fans seem to use the basic structure of the game, including its characters, mechanic, and narratives, as starting points for their own *COTG* experience. These fans modify the game’s rules and narratives to produce the most subjectively pleasing wrestling promotion of their imagination. Other fans seem to take exception to these practices, insisting that by violating rules or narratives provided by the game’s creator that they are misusing the materials, diminishing the pleasures of the game while simultaneously affronting the game’s creator. In an effort to preserve the integrity of the game, many members of the community act as a type of police force for the game, challenging those that disagree with their rules of the game into submission or driving them out of the game’s fan community. Those that are excommunicated do not feel welcome going to events like Galacticon, and their appreciation of the game is diminished greatly by these members of the community who seem to operate with impunity, sanctioned by the game’s creator. Filsinger’s continued silence on these issues has caused many

¹⁸¹ Specific arguments have taken place regarding the use of bootleg characters in the GWF (<http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=ask&action=display&thread=12493>), whether or not games should be released as digital files (<http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=ask&action=display&thread=17721>), the conversion to color cards in lieu of the traditional black-and-white cards (<http://filsingergames.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=gwf&action=display&thread=5111>), and the whether it is acceptable to alter the statistics of individual playing cards (<http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=ask&action=display&thread=12633>), to name a few notable examples.

to feel ostracized. One respondent to this study, when discussing how he had been treated by several members of the community and Filsinger's lack of a response, stated that, "I will always love the game, but it has certainly changed over the past few years thanks to Swarm and his posse."¹⁸² This "Posse" was the original cause of the formation of "The Deuce" message forum, chasing some members of the community from the "Fans of Filsinger Games" forum through constant harassment for how some members chose to play the game. One fan talked of former friends he had within the community who no longer play the game thanks to the bullying of this "Posse" of *COTG* fans, as he stated that these friends eventually got tired of the fighting and harassment and quit the game altogether.

An example of the bullying techniques employed by members of the community regarding how to properly play the game is when a discussion emerged in the online forum about changing the statistics of cards in one's own personal GWF. One fan asked if this sort of modification was acceptable to the community at large (a question that I also asked in my questionnaire and as mentioned previously, was mostly met with objection, perhaps because those who would have been in favor had been ostracized from the community at that point). The first response by a member of "The Posse" stated that,

"Changing stats is unheard of for people who play this game. It's a slap in the face to Tom as far as I'm concerned. He's been making this game since 1987. I think he knows what he's doing. The minute you alter a card's stats, why bother using him? Because then you're not really using a guy that Tom created. You're using your watered down version. But, with wrestling fans, everyone thinks they know everything."¹⁸³

¹⁸² The most notorious members of the community who bully those who deviate from the official rules outlined by Tom Filsinger are from Detroit and are often referred to as the "D-Town Posse," which consists of forum members such as "Swarm," "Payback," and "Joe."

¹⁸³ Payback. (2006, June 30). The Power of 2119 and Future. Message posted to <http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=ask&action=display&thread=12663>.

This point of view is certainly valid, but within the post are criticisms of the individual player, including derisive comments like “watered down,” “think they know everything,” and slapping Tom in the face. These sort of modifications are unacceptable to these members of the community, as they are an affront to the creator of the game’s presumed wishes, and by marking them as automatically inferior it positions this subjective version of the GWF as less significant than the one offered in the individual handbooks and sanctioned by Filsinger. In typical fashion, other members of “The Posse” were quick to join in the discussion in an overwhelming method of alienating those who disagree with their point-of-view, stating that,

“I don’t think enough people understand that all these guys are designed the way they are for a reason...I know for a fact that there are two guys in 2121 who are specifically designed to fight each other...What Tom does is a science...If you think he just slaps a bunch of moves on a card, gives it some choices, a finisher, like 99.9% of all the bootlegs out there, you couldn’t be more wrong. I really get the impression a lot of people do not understand even the most basic mechanics of this game, and anyone who changes stats on the cards does not know how to follow and understand all the rules of the *COTG* game card.”¹⁸⁴

Once again there is a concerted effort to privilege their conception of the game, equating any one who chooses to alter a card’s statistics as not understanding how to play the game. This response also uses the connection to Tom Filsinger as a way to make a point, insinuating a connection to the game’s creator that many in the community seem to be in awe of as a way to legitimize a particular point-of-view on what constitutes correct gameplay.

While participating on the Fans of Filsinger Games message forum, members of “The Posse” were often banned for various lengths of time due to their bullying of other members in the community. These bannings led to many debates between the forum’s moderator and members of “The Posse,” most notably Swarm. Eventually, Swarm formed his own online

¹⁸⁴ Swarm. (2006, June 30). The Power of 2119 and Future. Message posted to <http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=ask&action=display&thread=12663>.

message forum that he dubbed “The Greatest Board in the Galaxy.” Upon his departure from the Fans of Filsinger Games message forum, every thread in the forum was spammed with a goodbye message from Swarm that was titled “Fuck You” and read as follows:

“I'd like to take this time to say a few things about this olive branch Chris so kindly extended to me...First of all...Fuck off. I don't care what the fuck you do. Delete my fed...delete Payback's fed. We have back ups. It's fine. Delete our accounts. We don't care. We have decided to make our own board anyways- where people can be themselves and don't get banned because you are jealous of them, or because thier feds are way better than yours...hell you won't even get banned for calling the mods "crabby" (this is because no pussies will be mods on our board). If you know you're a bro this message is not for you. If your name is 400lb. Fat ass fucking hick Ken West - fuck off. You won't be there. If you fuck the Cloverfield Monster and live with 20 cats and don't even play the game, you won't be there either. Everyone else is cool...So later - love ya all.”¹⁸⁵

And with that, the battles at one message forum ended, as “The Posse” migrated to their new forum and left the Fans of Filsinger Games message board. In the days following the formation of The Greatest Board in the Galaxy many members of the Fans of Filsinger Games message forum who were not welcome at this new online destination received a message from community member “Payback” entitled “Just Wanted To Say” and in the contents of the message it read “Go fuck yourself.” The hostility exhibited by members of the community was exemplary of the fractured nature of the relationship between community members, members who seemingly shared much more in common than they differed on, as they were all fans of a card-and-dice game based on wrestling in the future. And yet, the divides within the community were deep then, and are still deep years later.

The obvious question is what drives this sort of behavior in relation to the game. The belief of many I spoke with in the community is simply that these members are a group of “trolls” who get off on “bullying” other members of the community. One respondent pointed to

¹⁸⁵ Swarm. (2008, February 8). Fuck You. Message posted to <http://cotg.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=suggestions&action=display&thread=10110>.

the coordination of their posts, as often they would gang up on a community member and bombard the message forum with rapid-fire posts that were hostile towards the original poster. However, others in the community reiterated how important the game was to these community members. One respondent stated that Swarm's "enthusiasm often got the best of him," but his actions were simply the result of his love for "the game and for Tom." There is certainly an Oedipal relationship occurring within this community, as many players idolize Filsinger for the years of enjoyment his game has provided. The fact that many expressed they have played the game since childhood only accentuates this idolatry, as Filsinger assumes an almost father-figure role for many in the community. When someone critiques his game, those who idolize him rush to his defense, with "The Posse" being foremost in that regard.

The other interpretation of the behavior of "The Posse" is that they too are playing with their identities and engaging their shadow within the rhetoric of play as Self. By assuming names such as "Swarm" and "Payback," these players are allowing parts of their self to come to the forefront in the safe space of the *COTG* fan community. I had a firsthand experience of this play when I went to Galacticon in 2006. I had been monitoring the forum for the game leading up to the event and noted the behavior of Swarm and his friends, and when I arrived at Galacticon in 2006 I walked up to a group of guys smoking outside the convention. After introducing myself I asked if any of them posted on the message forum and a guy in the middle of their group smirked. One guy next to him stated, "Don't you know who this is?" Another person announced that, "He's Swarm!" Even then I noted how much it felt like a mob film, with the boss having his henchmen introduce him. This fan was obviously playing with his status within the fan community of the game, reveling in his notoriety while having his friends introduce him to others in the community. This example is illustrative of how many members of

the community are playing with parts of their identity, despite the ramifications that play may have for the community at large.

The current divide within the community seems to stem from the perceived silence of Filsinger himself to these goings on within his small fan community. In their interviews, many confessed feeling angry that Filsinger has never apologized for the actions taken by Swarm, Payback, and others. One fan stated that it shows they are indeed part of “The Inner Circle” and are essentially speaking for Filsinger. He stated that Tom is not going to antagonize his customers, but the actions of “The Posse” are, to him, wholly endorsed by Filsinger himself. This endorsement is made more concrete due to the recent merger between The Greatest Board in the Galaxy and the Fisinger Games Official Message Board, as now the official message forum for the game is moderated by those same community members who ostracized, bullied, and drove away many in the community.

While it seems that the fractured state of the *COTG* fan community is a great detriment to the game, many respondents stated that their favorite aspect of the game is, in fact, the community of fans. Many stated that they have met dear friends through the game and their experiences online and at Galacticon, as the shared love of the game has brought them a connection that now transcends the game. Others stated that they love the feedback they get from fellow fans of the game regarding their own versions of the GWF, as they post the results of their personal federation on one of the Filsinger Games message forums and receive feedback from others in the community regarding how they are putting together their matches or narratives. In this way, these fans get a chance to be their own wrestling promotion that fantasy books before an actual audience, although one that exists solely online and gives minimal feedback in the message forums. Each view of the thread devoted to their GWF federation is a

quantifiable statistic that determines their success, a sign that they are connecting with their virtual audience of GWF fans. It is significant that these “views” provide the rationale for how The Posse have been able to attain such an esteemed status within the community despite some of their actions in the past. Since they are such notable characters, the threads devoted to their GWF federations get many “views” from others in the community. These numbers are then used to quantify their “fanbase,” as they attain a position of power or privilege within the community because their GWF feds are the most viewed on the various Filsinger Games forums. It seems that once again the notion of numbers measuring success has transitioned to this arena of wrestling, as there is a similar fetishization of exchange value here to what was employed by WWE fans debating with ROH fans within the Internet Wrestling Community. And similarly, those who disagree with this criterion are ostracized or made to be the vocal minority rather than the masses who obviously enjoy the antics/behavior of the established entity within this subcultural entity.

Conclusion

This battle over the proper way to play *Champions of the Galaxy* indicates the tension between imposed messages from media producers and the audiences who have the ability and potential to play with that media according to their own subjective interests and pleasures. Traditional ways to study these audiences offer an either/or perspective, where one side or the other is afforded victory. Either the audience hegemonically goes along with the intended messages or they resist those readings. Either the audience behaves like a mark and follows the rules as they are laid out or they modify the rules to fit their own needs, potentially destabilizing

what makes the game great to many others like a smart. What I found most of all from members of this community, however, are media smarks. The fans of *COTG* often did follow some of the rules and narratives outlined by Filsinger, but very often they deviated or modified them to suit their own needs. Further, these same fans would often fantasy book their own narratives by using the same raw material provided by Filsinger, effectively following the behavior of the wrestling mark by using the same characters and narratives but adjusting them in ways that also characterize the wrestling smart fan. These *COTG* fans were both mark and smart, or smarks, who were able to play both roles when the situation warranted one identity or the other. To look at these fans from only one perspective misses what makes the *COTG* audience distinct and what ties them to all forms of media. After all, any media form offers the audience an opportunity to fantasy book their own narrative, wondering what the movie would be like with an alternate ending or with different actors playing the roles. And of course, in the age of media convergence, the distinctions between various media forms are disintegrating rapidly. As these audiences are able to engage media in a variety of contexts, the examples of fantasy booking and playing with media content will only become more pronounced. The genre of wrestling, and this case study of the subculture for *Champions of the Galaxy* in particular, provides a model for understanding the complex processes of media audiences going forward.

Concluding Remarks from “Hegemony”

The preceding analysis on how the concept of play helps contextualize the practices of media audiences has seen forays into the genre of professional wrestling from a variety of perspectives. The first chapter featured the practices of wrestling fans that attended three different wrestling shows from two different wrestling promotions over a single weekend. The practices that were highlighted in this chapter were witnessed live in an ethnographic participant observation, as these fans engaged wrestling texts during *WrestleMania* weekend in April 2011. The second chapter detailed the online activities of wrestling fans, focusing on the manifestation of both popular and bourgeois aesthetics in the virtual space of the Internet Wrestling Community. The final chapter was the most concentrated subcultural entity of wrestling fandom as it focused on the fan community of a card-and-dice game based on wrestling in the distant future known as *Champions of the Galaxy*. In this chapter, the practices of fans who assume the identities of fictional wrestling characters was paramount, as access to the community was restricted to those who knew how to play the game correctly.

Future research could test the applicability of the play concept with other manifestations of media fandom. I have argued that this playful audience model, which is present within the wrestling audience, could be applied to media audiences outside of wrestling. Many within the wrestling industry have argued that wrestling is a distinctly unique business that requires a familiarity with its conventions in order to fully understand wrestling’s complexity (Matysik, 2009). If so, then the playful audience model may be unique to this genre. I argue, however, that professional wrestling instead presents the most visible manifestation of the playful audience and its complex practices, and that this visibility makes it a perfect case study rather than a

unique phenomenon. Further, the playful audience model is applicable to not only media fandom, but to all media audiences who encounter various media content in the age of convergence. Fan studies represents numerous potential case studies of the playful audience due to the visibility and array of practices exhibited by fans, and these practices must be understood not simply as isolated incidents but as representative of the practices of all media audiences. Even if audience members do not engage in fan-practices such as writing fan-fiction or posting in-character on internet forums, future research could engage what all media audiences actually do with the content they engage from the perspective of the playful audience.

The model of the playful audience represents a departure for the field of audience studies, as it posits a dialectical model of audience practices where media audiences are not positioned in binary categories such as active/passive, casual/hardcore, scholar/fan, mark/smart, and so on. Instead, the playful audience positions audiences in a state of Deleuzian (1997) “Becoming,” capable of being occupying either category in each binary relationship. Instead of an “either/or” choice, the playful audience permits communication scholars to conceptualize audiences as a “both/and” possibility. In this way media audiences resemble the dialectical synthesis of two opposing ideas, as this project demonstrated through the focus on the wrestling smark. However, this synthesis inevitably posits a new binary category, the newly formed synthesis serving as the next thesis in the dialectical equation. The concept of play disrupts this progression, as evidenced by the play of wrestling audiences. The smark can be thought of the synthesis of the mark and smart, but in each chapter we have seen examples of the wrestling smark acting more like a mark and more like a smart fan. Play allows for movement within the dialectical relationship, destabilizing the directionality of the “thesis+antithesis=synthesis” equation. The playful audience can embody any of these three positions, willfully moving within this paradigm

depending on the subjectivity and taste of the individual audience member in a state of Deleuzian Becoming. In this way, media audiences must be conceptualized as having the potential to play with every binary category attributed to them as they negotiate the content they engage.

The array of audience practices observed in this project represents the complexity of playful practices exhibited by fans of professional wrestling. In each chapter a different ethnographic methodology was chosen in order to get a different perspective on these practices, beginning with a broader approach and getting narrower and narrower with each chapter. In chapter one I encountered a wide range of audience behaviors as I conducted a participant observation of wrestling fans at three different events over a single weekend. I anonymously observed fans at these shows, shifting the focus from what was happening in the ring and instead looking directly to the audiences in attendance. The practices observed helped make sense of the wrestling performance in the ring, which is one reason wrestling was chosen as a case study for this project since the presence of the audience for each performance makes their behaviors visible. Over that weekend I observed fans playing with the rules of society and their own identities while attending events held by WWE and ROH. The benefit of this ethnographic approach is that I was literally present with the audience, experiencing what they experienced as it occurred and occupying the same physical space they were. This presence allowed for access to behaviors and phenomenon that would not translate to the television/internet audience watching from far away. However, my knowledge of these fans was limited to a single event, as once the event was over I no longer had access to their behavior, and during the show it was quite difficult to engage individual people in extensive conversations.

These limitations in chapter one were alleviated by the ethnographic methodology of chapter two, where I focused on the online behavior of members of the IWC (Internet Wrestling

Community). By focusing on four websites over several years, I was able to get an understanding of the major themes that dominate online discourse from members of the IWC, learning what they valued about different wrestling promotions and characters. I did not engage fans directly in this study, instead choosing to lurk at four different online forums and observing the discourses that developed naturally within the IWC. This chapter was more conceptual than the first since I was focusing on words over actions, but these words complement the actions that I was able to observe in the previous chapter. Taken together these two chapters provide an overview of the wrestling audience as it manifests at three live wrestling events and in online forums. Of course, the limitation of online ethnography is that the validity of each post is questionable, as these posts are made anonymously and may not be reflective of the real thoughts or feelings of the author outside of these virtual contexts. However, by focusing on four forums over several years I was able to highlight themes that came up over and over again, yielding an analysis more reflective of the thematic issues addressed in these online discourses rather than hinge the entire ethnography on an individual response.

The final chapter in the analysis is the most conventional ethnography, as I took an active role in the fan community of the *Champions of the Galaxy* card game by attending two conventions, soliciting responses from fans and providing a questionnaire, conducting in-depth telephone interviews with respondents, and participating in the online community as the aforementioned Hegemony character. This chapter represents the wrestling audience at its most playful, as the text requires audiences to play the game and imagine the spaces where matches are simulated for the pleasure of the individual player. In order to gain access to this tight-knit fan community I had to perform a character myself, playing the role of the heel in order to be accepted within the community. Of course, this decision is somewhat controversial, as my

actions certainly impacted the community and the results I was able to accumulate over the course of this study. However, without the Hegemony character I would not have acquired the access that I did, necessitating the serendipitous action that resulted in the character's creation. I had to ensure that my communication was always in-character when engaging these fans online, as one member of the community would even send me private messages occasionally warning me that I needed to "heel it up" a bit more so that I did not mistakingly turn Hegemony into a babyface.

These case studies demonstrate the complexity and vastness of play as a framework for understanding media audiences and their array of behaviors. Without the framework of play the practices of media audiences become contradictory and problematic, exploding dichotomous categories that have failed to accommodate the nuances of audience practices. The concept of play allows for an understanding of these practices that simultaneously permits and encourages the transgression of these categories, as audiences are able to always exist at either end of a particular spectrum in a state of Deleuzian (1997) "Becoming." At the onset of this analysis I also insisted that the concept of play was one that was performative in nature, as media audiences assume partial identities when engaging specific media content, playing with the possibilities specific texts offer. For this reason, I feel that it is fitting to turn the conclusion of this analysis over to a portion of my own identity that was introduced in chapter three – the character of "Hegemony" from *Champions of the Galaxy*. After all, without this character, the ethnography from the final chapter in this analysis would not have been possible. And considering this analysis has used professional wrestling as a genre to illuminate the importance of play, having a wrestling character's voice seems integral to the project.

Hegemony is also semi-autobiographical, as indicated in chapter three. He was conceptualized as a disgruntled graduate student who was frustrated with both the low status of professional wrestling (or more specifically the notion of professional wrestling that he/I preferred) and within academia, feeling it was too insular and isolated an institution. The character left academia to educate the masses about concepts in cultural studies like “hegemony, ideology, and cultural capital,” but lacked the interpersonal skills to connect with those he saw as below him due to his years insulated within the walls of academia. The art for the card, by artist Werner Mueck, was designed to feature Hegemony lecturing the crowd about how, if they only listen to him, their lives would benefit from his knowledge. When giving this description to Mueck, I imagined an audience derisively jeering him the entire time. I mention this only to warn readers to not take the following incisive comments to heart, as they are solely the words of the Hegemony character who is incapable, apparently, of not coming off as pompous and arrogant. Hegemony is a performance, one that I am both proud of and struggle with, as he is an indulgement of my own Jungian shadow, a reminder of my ethnographic experience, and a snapshot of an autobiographical moment in my academic career. Most of all, Hegemony is a personal example of play, an academic megalomaniac that cares deeply about his area of expertise, feeling it deserves more respect from both the intellectual community and the public that the character fails to adequately reach.



Figure 6 – Hegemony

“Checkmate. After all this time, at last I am afforded the proper venue and opportunity to address my audience. I spent years, YEARS, in a community filled with sycophants and bullies, enduring their pointless meanderings and misguided constraints. I spent years biting my tongue, choosing my words very carefully so as to not overly antagonize those around me. After all, they were all so very fragile, it would truly be catastrophic if the full extent of my fury was unleashed on the unsuspecting brethren I have cultivated over these years. But here we are, all of the pieces of the gameboard fully visible, the extent of my brilliance on display for the world to study over again and again. Go ahead, retrace the steps, connect the dots, marvel in the complexity of Hegemony’s vision. For we are at the threshold of my obtaining the veneration I deserve, and I intend to savor the moment.

I remember when this all started, when the game pieces needed to be carefully arranged, when the rules demanded reverence. Indeed, if I wanted access I would have to play the game correctly, subsuming my own identity for something more palatable to those who make the rules. And so that is what happened for many years, but now is MY chance to rewrite those rules. To not make those who come after me play this futile game. Of course I am but one and they are many, but at least future players will understand the options that they have, won’t they? They will understand that I can grant them salvation from this cruel game.

You see, Champions of the Galaxy, and the genre of professional wrestling for that matter, is the (metaphorical) key to salvation. Within its simplicity lies possibility, and it has been my mission to illuminate these possibilities. I figured that by starting with a minimal unit like the fan community of COTG that I could subsequently expand out to the total IWC and wrestling audience in the future, educating the masses as I made my way through these subcultures. Admittedly, sometimes educating the masses is distressing work since the uneducated choose to remain in the darkness despite the repeated chances they are given by prophets like myself. It pains me to see so many fulfill the stereotypes I sought to implode, for so many to be left behind to curse themselves for not listening. I gave them many opportunities to grant me deference, especially since the outcome of this game has been inevitable for quite some time now.

For you see, my message is about to be eternalized within the community I sought acceptance within so long ago. But it will be done on my own terms, not on the terms of those who sought to limit the possibilities I offer. My values and goals will be glorified, whereas once they were deemed insignificant. I agreed to play the game, but only if I could rewrite the rules. And this is indeed all a game, it always has been. It just took someone like me, Hegemony, to bring it to light. Every time I take part in this community, it is and always has been a game. Every time I let one of the sycophants have his or her moment in the sun, it has been part of this game. Every time I allowed myself to be stymied, it has been part of this game, part of my eventual victory. I really do appreciate the effort of those who sought to preserve the status quo, who sought to deter this inevitable outcome. But here we are, as I always said we would be.

And now that the game's conclusion is upon us I am left to ponder my justified rewards. Days of googling myself to see how many citations I have been accredited, a lucrative book deal

to distribute my manifesto to the masses and the intelligentsia, a tenured position at a leading university. I have my list of quotable soundbytes for the media and my array of questions and exclamations for the conferences that will be held in my honor. And with each utterance, with each public moment, I will exert my influence over this culture, moving us all towards my vision. For you see, the goal is to completely destabilize the hierarchy of taste, and in the end demonstrate that every level of the system can and should be modified. In the end, the goal is to play the game, and to win.

And in the end, the ultimate victory belongs to Hegemony. Let the trumpets herald my victory, let the naysayers revel in their own begrudging defeat, and let this moment now and forever mark my triumph. Hegemony not only entered this community, he changed it forever. And we are all better for the experience.

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Appendix I

Revenue Stream	% Revenue 2008	% Revenue 2009	% Revenue 2010
Arena Events (Tickets/Merchandise)	23.6%	27.1%	25.7%
Pay-Per-View Buys	17.4%	16.8%	14.7%
Television Rights	20.5%	25.0%	27.8%
Fees/Ads			
WWE Classics On Demand	1.2%	1.1%	1.0%
Home Video	11.1%	8.3%	6.7%
Licensing	11.5%	9.4%	10.8%
Magazines	2.9%	2.8%	2.3%
Web Site (Ads & Merchandise)	6.6%	6.9%	6.0%

Source – Meltzer, Dave. 2011, February 23. *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*.

Appendix II

PPV Event #	2008 (World/Domestic)	2009 (World/Domestic)	2010 (World/Domestic)
1	575,000/403,000	450,000/288,000	465,000/259,000
2	365,000/256,000	272,000/174,000	287,000/160,000
3	1,041,000/697,000	960,000/582,000	890,000/497,000
4	210,000/141,000	182,000/116,000	201,000/112,000
5	252,000/169,000	228,000/146,000	218,000/121,000
6	200,000/134,000	213,000/136,000	158,000/88,000
7	196,000/135,000	267,000/166,000	164,000/98,000
8	477,000/329,000	369,000/229,000	349,000/209,000
9	211,000/146,000	169,000/105,000	165,000/99,000
10	261,000/157,000	283,000/164,000	210,000/109,000
11	153,000/92,000	181,000/105,000	137,000/71,000
12	319,000/191,000	235,000/136,000	244,000/127,000
13	193,000/116,000	228,000/132,000	195,000/101,000
14	286,000/191,000	178,000/114,000	No Event
Totals	4,739,000/3,157,000	4,215,000/2,593,000	3,683,000/2,051,000

Source - Meltzer, Dave. 2011, February 23. *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*.

Appendix III

Transcript of CM Punk's "worked-shoot" promo on the June 27, 2011 edition of WWE's *Monday Night Raw*.

"John Cena, while you lay there, hopefully as uncomfortable as you can possibly be, I want you to listen to me. I want you to digest this, because before I leave in three weeks with your WWE championship, I have a lot of things I want to get off my chest.

I don't hate you, John. I don't even dislike you. I like you a hell of a lot more than I like most people in the back. I hate this idea that you're the best, because you're not. I'm the best. I'm the best in the world.

There's one thing you're better at than I am, and that's kissing Vince McMahon's ass. You're as good at kissing Vince McMahon's ass as Dwayne (Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson). He's a pretty good ass kisser, always was, and still is.

Oops, I'm breaking the fourth wall. I am the best wrestler in the world. I've been the best ever since day one when I walked into this company. And I've been vilified and hated since that day because Paul Heyman saw something in me that nobody else wanted to admit.

That's right, I'm a Paul Heyman guy. You know who else was a Paul Heyman guy? Brock Lesnar. And he split, just like I'm splitting. But the biggest difference between me and Brock is that I'm going to leave with the WWE championship.

I've grabbed so many of Vincent K. McMahon's imaginary brass rings that it's finally dawned on me that they're just that. They're completely imaginary. The only thing that's real is me. And the fact that day in and day out, for almost six years, I've proved to everybody in the world that I am the best on this microphone, in that ring, and even on commentary. Nobody can touch me. And yet, no matter how many times I prove it, I'm not on your lovely little collectors' cups. I'm not on the cover of the program. I'm barely promoted. I don't get to be in movies. I'm not on any crappy show on the USA Network. I'm not on the poster for WrestleMania. I'm not on the signature that's produced at the start of the show. I'm not on Conan O'Brien. I'm not on Jimmy Fallon. But the fact of the matter is, I should be.

And trust me, this isn't sour grapes, but the fact that Dwayne is in the main event of WrestleMania next year and I'm not makes me sick.

Oh hey, let me get something straight. Those of you who are cheering me right now, you are just as big a part of me leaving as anyone else. Because you're the ones sipping out of those collector cups right now. You're the ones that buy those programs that my face isn't on the cover of. And then at 5 in the morning at the airport, you try to shove in my face thinking you can get an autograph and sell it on eBay because you're too lazy to get a real job.

I'm leaving with the WWE championship on July 17, and hell, who knows, maybe I'll go defend it in New Japan Pro Wrestling. Maybe I'll go back to Ring of Honor. Hey Colt Cabana, how you doing?

The reason I'm leaving is you people. Because after I'm gone, you're still going to pour money into this company. I'm just a spoke on the wheel. The wheel's going to keep turning. And I understand that, that Vince McMahon's gonna make money despite himself. He's a millionaire who should be a billionaire. You know why he's not a billionaire? It's because he surrounds himself with glad-handing nonsensical douchebag (edited) yes-men like John Laurinaitis, who's gonna tell him everything he wants to hear.

And I'd like to think that maybe this company will be better after Vince McMahon is dead, but the fact is, it's gonna get taken over by his idiotic daughter and his doofus son-in-law and the rest of his stupid family. Let me tell you a personal story about Vince McMahon. You know we do this whole bully campaign" (mic cuts off at this point, he talks without any words being audible other than screaming 'I've been silenced') and they fade to black.